

Your

MBA

Game Plan



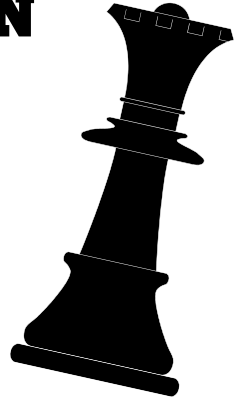
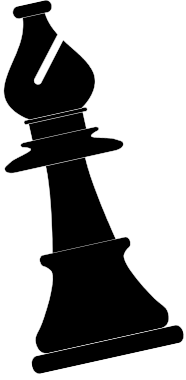
PROVEN
STRATEGIES
*for Getting Into
the* TOP
BUSINESS
SCHOOLS

OMARI BOUKNIGHT & SCOTT SHRUM

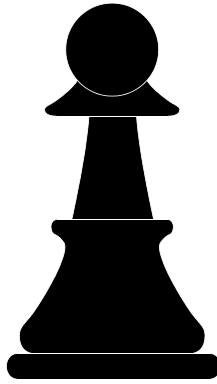
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YOUR MBA GAME PLAN



**Proven Strategies for Getting Into the Top
Business Schools**



*By
Omari Bouknight & Scott Shrum*



The Career Press, Inc.
Franklin Lakes, NJ

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DEDICATION



Scott—Dedicated to the memory of James Bartlett, the most brilliant, principled, and steadfast friend anyone could ever hope to have.

Omari—For my parents, who showed me truth in God, power in education, and the burden of legacy.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It's safe to say that we hardly knew what we were getting into when we first decided to write a book about getting into business school. Fortunately, the people below made the whole process much more bearable, and the final product a lot more valuable. We are truly thankful for their assistance along the way.

John Abbamondi; Kirsten Beucler; Alex Brown; Justin Crandall; Jon Crawford; Nicole DeFelice; Brian Dukes; Buckethead Section, Kellogg Class of 2004; Stacey Farkas; Brigid Ganley; Kavita Gunda; Shaan Kandawalla; Michael Lewis; Mark Lueking; Carolina Menezes; Campbell Murray; Matt Niksch; Tom Pusic; Sarah Richardson; Section A, HBS Class of 2004; Brian Schmidt; Brendan Sheehan; Misha Simmonds; Doug Stein; Anita Thekdi; Chad Troutwine; and Mike Worosz.

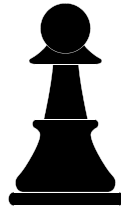
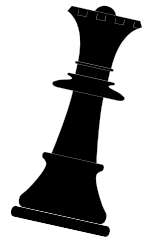
Also, this book probably wouldn't have happened if not for the supportive community of fellow b-school applicants on the *BusinessWeek* online forums. We'd like to thank everyone out there for putting up with our surveys and giving us great feedback as this book took shape.

Finally, a few people have been particularly helpful, patient, and supportive in this process. Scott would like to especially thank his wife, Anita, and his parents. Omari would like to especially thank his entire family and Kavita for their continual support. These people believed in us and stuck with us the whole way through.





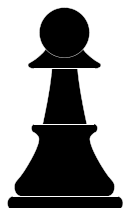
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FOREWORD



What are your stats? This is the most harmful phrase in the English language, as far as any business school applicant is concerned. In this case, “stats” refers to an applicant’s basic quantifiable characteristics, such as “700 GMAT, 3.5 GPA at a top-25 undergrad, four years W/E in P/E.” W/E in P/E???

Something is terribly wrong. That stream of numbers and letters tells us nothing about who the applicant really is. What does she like to do for fun? What kind of leadership roles has she taken on? Where does she want to be 10 years from now? We have no idea. Yet we’ve gotten to the point where many business school applicants immediately ask each other this question whenever they meet. It’s a senseless secret handshake.

Make no mistake, the numbers do matter. You need to demonstrate a minimum level of intellectual ability in order to get into any business school. But even though the Stanfords and Whartons of the world boast GMAT averages in the low 700s, don’t fool yourself into thinking that a 770 GMAT score means that you’re definitely in. Even more importantly, don’t think that a sub-700 score means that you’re definitely out. The same goes for your undergraduate GPA. And your work experience. And anything else that you can slap a number on.

Unfortunately, the majority of applicants fall into this trap. They focus on one or two statistics and let the rest of their applications suffer. Even worse, they focus on the *wrong* things, and assume that ultra-high GMAT scores or impressive jobs (such as “four years W/E in P/E,” which means that an applicant has four years of work experience in private equity) will carry them into business school. Or they think that a 620 GMAT score equals certain rejection from any “top 10” school, which couldn’t be further from the truth.

We spoke with hundreds of fellow applicants while working on our own business school applications. Many of them were amazingly bright and were great at what they did, but sometimes they didn’t seem to “get it.” They would say things such as, “I took

the GMAT three times, and I went from a 670 to a 690 to a 700. I'm thinking of enrolling in another GMAT prep class and taking the test a fourth time. What do you think? Don't worry; I'll get around to the essays eventually." To the admissions committee, applicants with great GMAT scores but so-so essays and recommendations are a dime a dozen, and "dime a dozen" won't get you into a top business school.

After seeing too many qualified business school candidates get rejected because of critical strategic mistakes in their applications, we decided to see if we could help. We examined the advice available on the market and realized that while there were some good books that target the business school application process, many of the applicants who were reading them were still asking the wrong questions. So we took a step back and tried to get to the root of the problem. We realized that many applicants are of top-business-school caliber, but don't understand what admissions committees are really looking for in an application.

We decided to build a new application framework. We took a close look at each part of the application process and asked, "What are admissions committees really looking for here, and how can applicants make sure that they're delivering it?" The result is a strategic approach to the business school application process. By applying this approach through your MBA game plan, you can greatly improve your chances of receiving admittance into the top programs.

We haven't made a living from providing college candidates with application advice, but we have managed to get into the top MBA programs during a very competitive year by using strategic analysis and targeted approaches. We've been in your shoes, and hope to share with you what we've learned over the course of the application process. We also hope we can save you from some of the most common mistakes that applicants make. If you can make it easy for admissions officers to see that you have a distinctive profile and would fit well with their schools' cultures, then you'll quickly get ahead of other candidates. And getting ahead of other candidates is probably what you were shooting for when you picked up this book in the first place.

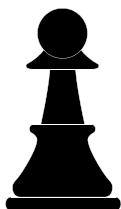
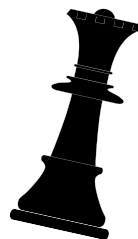
Best of luck to you!

—Scott and Omari



1

NEW GAME, NEW RULES



To my relief, the cab slowed down and the driver waved me over. I had been on the verge of running for the last 30 minutes, trying to reach my interview with Harvard Business School (HBS) on time. Sliding into the back seat of the taxi, I heavily exhaled directions to the admissions office, rejuvenated with confidence knowing that I would not arrive to the interview late. Now all I had to do was differentiate myself from the other 10,000 applicants and prove to the admissions committee that I embody HBS's culture and mission. Suddenly, it hit me. This would be no small task.

In many ways, the on-campus interview is a wake-up call. For many applicants, it is the first time that they interact directly with the competition and with their target schools. Stepping into the admissions office, my alarm went off as I began to discuss experiences, backgrounds, and objectives with other applicants who were waiting to interview. The conversations were enlightening, as gossip and advice on the application process were freely swapped. More so, however, these conversations were humbling. I spoke with a military pilot who had escorted the President around the country, a scientist in biotechnology who was working on a cancer-fighting antibody, and a dot-com entrepreneur who had executed a multi-million dollar initial public offering. What did I have to offer?

I no longer believed my family's frequent promises that I would be admitted. They obviously didn't understand what I was up against.

"Your interviewer is ready to see you now," the receptionist called out to me. Moments later, I was sitting across from an admissions officer. A 30-minute conversation ensued in which we discussed all aspects of my application, except for my GMAT score and GPA. Indeed, the interview was very similar to the several others in which I took part. Because most applicants to top business schools have the ability to succeed in the curricula, GPA and test scores are often ruled out as differentiating factors. So what remained to separate me from the thousands of other applicants?

The admissions officer asked questions about my story. What were my career goals and how would attending business school play a role in meeting those goals? How would my

professional and personal experiences enhance the classroom dynamic? In what ways had I acted as a leader to my peers?

Fortunately, I was ready. My responses were well crafted and were supported with details that augmented the assertions. These responses were all part of a strategic approach that I developed to target the schools to which I applied. The interview transformed into a platform on which I established my case. The admissions officer became my audience, measuring my storyline against other applicants' stories and against the school's sense of "fit."

By the end of the interview, I felt satisfied. I had covered each of my points and made a convincing case for why I belonged at HBS. Exiting the interview, I didn't concern myself with finding a taxi. I wanted to savor my victory. Thanks to my preparation, I was one step closer to being admitted.

The Increasing Popularity of Business School

Business is a natural extension of all professions. Whether the occupation we pursue is in fashion, banking, technology, or healthcare, business permeates the fabric of the workplace. Perhaps this was never more evident than during the Internet craze of the late 1990s, when having an innovative business plan in the Silicon Valley became as cliché as having a ground-breaking movie script in Hollywood. While the subsequent economic downturn sent the majority of business plans to the trash, our entrepreneurial spirit and industrial mentality has remained undiminished. Indeed, the number of applications that were sent to top business schools during the 2002–2003 season reached an approximate 100,000 applications, an increase of more than 30 percent over the number of applications submitted a few years prior.

Over the last several years, the rules to the business school application game have changed drastically. As a result of the increase in applications, the competition among applicants has intensified. The average GMAT score and undergraduate GPA of admitted students to top business schools have risen to almost 690 and 3.45, respectively. The level of competition has heightened to the point that the acceptance rates for some schools have fallen to near single-digits. This has pushed schools to closely examine all aspects of the application beyond the basic statistics.

Many applicants, however, are responding to this increased competition by merely focusing on improving their GMAT scores. Any popular periodical's business school rankings prominently feature a school's average GMAT score next to its name, so it is only natural that applicants focus on this obvious component of the application. But while the GMAT may be the first challenge in the application process that must be navigated, high scores alone certainly won't win the business school application game.

MBA Application Strategy

Traditional strategic analysis examines the approach of a decision-maker given his environment and the tactics of other decision-makers who are in pursuit of similar objectives. As an applicant, you must succeed in an environment that demands differentiation

against the competition and proper fit with the programs to which you apply. The ultimate questions that you as an applicant must answer are:

- ☐ How do I measure against the competition?
- ☐ How do I measure against my targeted business schools?

In our admittedly subjective estimation, the probability of gaining acceptance to top business school programs looks something like the following:

	Don't Fit Program	Fit Program
Differentiate From Competition	10%–20%	50%–70%
Don't Differentiate From Competition	0%–5%	10%–20%

The rest of this book focuses on developing answers to those two questions and getting you to the upper right-hand cell. It will do so in a functional and comprehensive manner, highlighting all aspects of the application process. You will learn how to position yourself based on your experiences and your target schools, how to write effective essays, and how to execute your application strategy.

Understanding the competition

When Omari first started the business school application process, one of the first pieces of insight he was given dealt with the number of candidates applying with his professional profile: *If you want to gain admittance to a top program, you must first find a way to differentiate yourself from the thousands of other consultants who are applying.* This is good advice for any applicant, regardless of the profile. Therefore, it is helpful to get into the minds of admissions officers and of other business school candidates with the knowledge that these candidates will have applications that cross the officers' desks before and after your own application. In general, there are two aspects of your application that admissions officers will compare with other candidates' applications: Your profile and your career goals.

Your profile

The first aspect of differentiation that you must understand as a business school candidate is that all applicants have an Achilles' heel. We all have a weakness in our profile that will be reflected in our application unless it is appropriately addressed. Whether the issue is number of years of work experience, lack of community service activities, low GPA, poor writing ability, low GMAT, unconvincing interview skills, or overconfidence, all candidates have an aspect of their profiles that, unaddressed, could lead to the dreaded "ding," as rejections are commonly called.

Your profile consists of your academic background, professional experiences, and personal interests and activities. As much as possible, the components in your profile should be multifaceted and consistent with an overall theme.

Multifaceted

Admissions officers are looking for candidates who demonstrate multiple dimensions through various interests. A common question that is asked during business school interviews is: “Outside of your professional activities, what are your personal interests and endeavors?” Top business schools want to ensure that they do not merely admit workaholic drones, but rather candidates who lead interesting and inspiring lives.

Consistent

Not too long ago, we spoke with Carrie, an applicant who was declined admittance to the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University. During her feedback session with an admissions officer, one of the messages that Carrie received was that she lacked community service experience. Actually, Carrie did have community service experience, but it was not consistent with the overall message that she conveyed in her application. The community service activities in which Carrie took part appeared to be events in which she participated purely so that they could be posted on her resume. Admission committee members are savvy enough to detect when an applicant’s attempts to enhance her profile are contrived, so you therefore need to weave the components of your profile into your story in a logical and consistent manner.

The second and third chapters will assist you in differentiating your application story from the competition. Chapter 2 will outline the characteristics that are valued by admissions officers and show you how to demonstrate these characteristics in your own application. In highlighting those characteristics, you will ensure that your profile is multifaceted and consistent with a targeted story. This approach impresses top business schools, as they are searching for candidates who will add something unique to the classroom dynamic. Chapter 2 will also show you how to overcome certain weaknesses that your application may contain. Specific profiles will be covered in Chapter 3, detailing their typical strengths and weaknesses, and providing guidance on how to overcome the stereotypes and tendencies that are associated with them.

Your career goals

Where you are going is just as important as where you are coming from. Admissions officers often cite candidates’ inability to articulate their post-graduation goals—and how the business school’s curriculum will support those goals—as a contributing factor in a candidate’s rejection.

As you communicate your career goals, you should convey an overall story that makes it easy for the admissions committee to see why an MBA makes sense for you. Typically, the career goal aspect of your story will either describe your motivation to make a career change or your intent to bolster your current career direction. Whichever career path you intend to pursue, the messages you communicate in the application should reflect innovation and an entrepreneurial spirit. That doesn’t mean that all

applicants should strive to start their own businesses, but rather that business schools are looking for candidates who want to contribute a fresh perspective and new insight to their chosen professions.

Use the application as a forum in which to display ambition and ingenuity as you discuss future objectives. Additionally, you should discuss the ways in which the targeted school's specific curriculum would aid you in achieving those objectives.

Chapter 4 will provide you with details on each component of the application process. Your story should be reflected in each of these components.

Understanding Your Business School Targets

Most business schools look for similar qualities in their applicants. They look for students who demonstrate academic aptitude, leadership, an ability to work well with peers and subordinates, integrity, and ambition, just to name a few.

So does this mean that the applications to your target schools should be the same? Of course not. Each school tends to emphasize certain traits over others and looks for examples to support these traits. A quick look at the essay questions from a few business school applications tells you that each school asks about these qualities in different ways. Here's the irony: Each school claims to look for a unique type of candidate, yet it seems that every year there are some applicants who manage to get into all of the top programs. Do these candidates really have *every* trait that all of these schools are looking for?

Probably not. More likely, they understand the emphasis that each school places on specific traits, and they know how to highlight those traits in their application. Successful applicants know that MIT Sloan values analytical ability, and they therefore stress their methodical approach to business problems. They know that Fuqua really does pride itself on its teamwork-oriented culture, and they highlight the success they've had while working in teams.

These are obvious examples, but this is an area where many applicants stumble. They either don't give enough thought to highlighting the traits that each school looks for, or they "tack on" one trite example in a half-hearted attempt to meet the requirement. The result is almost always a rejection because the applicants failed to demonstrate proper fit with their target schools.

What is "fit"?

In short, "fitting" with a school means demonstrating that you have the ability to succeed there, you are someone the school would be glad to have as part of its community, and you will serve as an ambassador for the school after you graduate.

In order to convey proper fit with a school, you should demonstrate that:

- ☐ You understand what the school stands for and why it is important. When you say, "Darden preaches leadership," you are able to give examples of what leadership means to you and explain why you want to further strengthen your own leadership abilities in business school.

- ☐ You embody the traits that the school most wants to see in its students. You don't need to have climbed Mount Everest to have demonstrated accomplishment or aced the GMAT to demonstrate quantitative excellence. You do need to be able to illustrate how your everyday life is peppered with examples of the traits for which the school looks.
- ☐ You will become very involved in your business school, from contributing to class discussions to running student organizations to being an active alum 20 years from now. One great way to communicate this is by pointing to similar experiences with your undergraduate school.
- ☐ You are the kind of person whom your classmates would want to work with on a team project at 3 a.m. Exhibiting a penchant for working in teams and a sociable personality will establish the basis for this.

One other extremely important question that an admissions officer asks about every applicant is, "Would he actually attend this school if he were accepted?" Admissions officers know that you're applying to multiple schools, and they know that their school may not be your first choice. But you need to convey enough knowledge and enthusiasm about the school to convince admissions officers that you would strongly consider attending their school if you were accepted. The history of business school applications is littered with stories of people with stellar credentials who were rejected by "safety" schools. If you don't sound sincere about wanting to attend a given school, you can expect that school to return the favor by not wanting you.

Demonstrating "fit" in your application

Your entire application should spell out how well you fit with your target school. Practically speaking, though, the parts of the application that will do this the most are your essays, recommendations, and interview. Think of these as your opportunities to talk about how your background and future direction correspond with what the school has to offer, and to discuss them in a way that lets your personality come through. Yes, you will answer specific questions for each school, but admissions officers inevitably want to know what's most important to you and why.

In essays, admissions officers most want to hear about actions that you have taken to solve a real problem or reach an actual goal, not what you would do in a hypothetical situation. They also want to hear what you learned from your experiences. Be as specific as possible in describing what you have accomplished and what you have learned in the process.

The same goes for recommendations. Everyone finds someone to write a positive recommendation for them, but a truly great recommendation will support your positioning by providing specific examples of how you demonstrated leadership, succeeded as part of a team, etc. We can't emphasize this enough: Be as specific as possible!

Before you put together your applications, you should know exactly what you want them to communicate. Chapter 6 will help you build your game plan, which will bring out the messages that you want to convey to each of your target schools.

Selecting your schools

As important as it is to establish proper fit in your applications, you must first select the schools to which you will apply. The game is reversed, as you must decide which schools fit you rather than having the schools decide that you fit them.

Selecting schools should be an introspective process. You should be warned, however that people who don't even know your name will have an opinion on where you should apply. Also remember that school rankings are just one piece of information to consider. Certainly rankings can be helpful tools in getting familiar with the schools' perceived strengths and weaknesses. Still, it's important that you do your own research. After all, no magazine or newspaper knows what really matters most to you.

Do not be enticed by prestige alone. While it certainly may be a factor in making your selections, there are plenty of other criteria that should be considered. Some of the selection criteria that you may want to use in evaluating schools include:

- ☐ Curriculum emphases.
- ☐ Typical career paths of graduates.
- ☐ Teaching style.
- ☐ Student culture.
- ☐ Compensation upon graduation.
- ☐ Financial aid opportunities.
- ☐ International perspective and access.
- ☐ Geographical location.
- ☐ Facilities.
- ☐ Diversity.
- ☐ Cost of tuition and living.
- ☐ Class size.
- ☐ Use of technology.

Fortunately, there is an abundance of resources available to help you evaluate these criteria. Some of the steps you should undertake are:

- ☐ Visit business school Websites.
- ☐ Review curriculum information.
- ☐ Speak with current students and alumni.
- ☐ Speak with faculty.
- ☐ Attend business school forums.
- ☐ Visit the schools.

We will discuss some of these resources and criteria in more detail later. We will also assist you in your evaluation of programs. Chapter 5 takes a look at the business school selection process and provides an overview of 30 top business schools, with perspectives on how to gain admittance to them. Finally, we've compiled a list of frequently asked questions (FAQs), which you will find at the end of most chapters. These are questions that we've heard a number of applicants ask. The FAQs have been placed in different chapters depending on their topics.

The B-school Decision

The decision to apply to business school is likely to be one of the most important decisions you'll make in your career. For full-time students, the investment is likely to be in excess of \$100,000 before you even take opportunity costs (the salary you would have earned during those two years) into consideration. And with more than 70 percent of MBAs taking out loans to pay for at least a portion of their education, it's clear that you shouldn't just wake up one morning and decide that you want to go to business school.

Interestingly, that seems to be exactly the way some business school applicants arrived at their decision. Others (read: investment bankers and consultants) scheduled "apply to business school" in their Outlook calendars four years ago as if it's just another item to check off. Regardless of how you arrived at this decision, you should really spend some time thinking about what you want to get out of the business school experience.

The bottom line is that you absolutely have to be passionate about attending business school before making the decision to apply. Sure, the thought of going \$100,000 into debt is intimidating, but there are plenty of ways in which you can balance the costs of b-school, including a large salary at the end of the rainbow. Perhaps the more daunting factor is the admissions process itself. Indeed, you must be passionate about b-school, because the application process will deter anyone who isn't dedicated to getting in. Certainly this book will help you with every step in that process, but unfortunately we can't do much to instill the dedication that it takes to get in. That part is up to you.

Thankfully, business school programs come in all sorts of shapes, sizes, and colors, so you should be able to select a program that fits your needs. Here are some of your options:

- ❑ **Full-time:** As the title would suggest, full-time programs are the most involved option. U.S. b-school programs are generally two years in duration, although there are some one-year programs, and require students to leave their professional positions. Students like this option, because it gives them full exposure to the b-school experience. Certainly the opportunity costs are higher than the other options, but the experience is richer, because of the amount of time spent with classmates, faculty, and speakers. Generally, full-time is seen as a good option for people who are considering some type of career transition, be it a new industry, function, or position. One of the benefits of full-time programs that allows this transition to occur is the summer internship. There is heated debate over whether there is actually any financial benefit to attending a full-time program. Although there is no clear answer, our personal experiences have shown that in addition to making a career transition, there are great intangible benefits to being surrounded by intelligent, motivated people for two years. Our focus, in terms of providing application strategy advice, will be on full-time programs. The application processes for part-time and distance learning programs, however, are very similar. You can still benefit from the advice in this book should you decide not to apply to a full-time program.

- ❑ **Part-time:** If you are satisfied with your current career path and can't fathom the thought of breaking away from the workforce for one or two years, a part-time program might be what you're looking for. Part-time students generally follow the same curriculum as their full-time counterparts, but take all of their classes during the evenings and on weekends. Most part-time students take three to five years to finish their degrees. Many part-timers report that the class load combined with their normal work load can be intense at times, but they are happy not to have to take on the extra debt load.
- ❑ **Distance-learning:** These programs are quickly rising in popularity as people become more comfortable with taking classes online. Typically, students will download course material and assignments from the b-school Website and have access, via the Internet, to faculty. On weekends, students will then meet in the classroom to discuss that week's material. Distance-learning programs are normally two or three years in length and feature curricula similar to that of full-time programs. The benefits are that you can continue your career in a location that isn't within close proximity of the program in which you're enrolled. B-schools are scrambling to see how they can capitalize on this trend and often refer to them as "eMBA" programs. Be aware that a large tradeoff you make in choosing a distance-learning program is that you will miss out on the opportunity to be surrounded by exceptional peers from all walks of life. If you are comfortable with this tradeoff and are mostly interested in the hard skills that an MBA can deliver (especially if you want to move ahead in your current job, rather than find a new job), then a distance-learning option may be right for you.
- ❑ **Executive MBA:** Executive MBA (EMBA) programs are similar to distance-learning programs in that they appeal to professionals who are further along in their careers than typical full-time applicants. Also like distance-learning programs, EMBA programs allow students to remain employed full-time. The main difference between the two program types is that EMBA students don't access course content online. Rather, students take all of their courses in the classroom on weekends. The majority of students in EMBA programs are sponsored by their companies. EMBA programs generally follow similar curricula as full-time programs and can take anywhere from two to five years to complete.
- ❑ **Executive programs:** For those who are further along in their careers and have specific aspects of business they would like to learn more about, executive education programs might be the way to go. Executive education programs generally run for one or two weeks and provide established executives with the opportunity to improve their competency in one of a variety of business topics from mergers and acquisitions to leading change in an organization to supply chain management. Their short length allows executives to rapidly get educated in an area without infringing upon their

work schedule. These programs are also a nice way to get up to speed on a business topic without enduring lectures on topics with which you are already familiar. Executive programs are, however, notoriously expensive. You can expect one these programs to set you or your company back anywhere from \$2,000 to \$20,000. Additionally, you won't receive any type of degree for your participation. At best, you can hope to receive some type of certification. Still, you will enjoy a fairly simple application process. Most applications request information on your professional background (no GMAT, no essays, no interview, no recommendations, etc.) and can be accessed directly from business schools' Websites. Overall, executive education programs are much more interested in your ability to pay than your qualifications. So if you're reading this book in order to develop a strategy to get into an executive education program, you can stop right now.

- ☐ **Ph.D.:** If you are enamored with thought of teaching business concepts, then you should consider going the Ph.D. route. Business schools are always looking for fresh talent, knowing that faculty strength is a major differentiating factor in the eyes of applicants. Ph.D. programs generally take four to five years to complete and in many cases require you to take some MBA coursework before specializing. Although you will be in school much longer than with a full-time MBA program, you will receive considerably more financial assistance. You should know, however, that Ph.D. programs can be extremely difficult to gain admittance to, even more so than their MBA counterparts. Many Ph.D. programs at top schools only take a handful of students per specialty each year. Additionally, landing your dream faculty position can be much more challenging than landing your dream business job because faculty spots at top schools are always limited.

In addition to these basic options, you should also consider whether you want to apply for a dual degree program or a specialty program. Dual degree programs provide you with the ability to earn an MBA degree and another advanced degree in less time than it would take to complete both degrees separately. Unfortunately, there's no two-for-one deal on the price of pursuing a dual degree. Some of the most popular degrees to combine with an MBA include:

- ☐ Law.
- ☐ Public policy.
- ☐ Education.
- ☐ International studies.
- ☐ Engineering.
- ☐ Medicine.
- ☐ Health administration.

If you decide to pursue a dual degree, you should make sure that you understand how the extra degree will be beneficial. You should be wary of pursuing it for the

prestige of getting additional letters after your name. In fact, some companies might be slow to consider you during recruiting, because of the fear that they'd have to compensate you more for both degrees. Also, know that a dual degree may actually provide you with less flexibility. If, for instance, you get a dual degree in business and medicine, then firms outside of healthcare will immediately ask why you're interested in them, given your background. With that said, if you have a firm understanding of how the additional degree fits in with your career goals, are willing to pay the extra tuition, and don't mind spending the additional time, then a dual degree is probably worth pursuing.

Apart from dual degree programs, several schools offer specialization programs within their core business school curricula. These programs generally require you to take a few required MBA courses before following the specialization component of the curriculum. Examples of specialization programs include:

- ☐ Financial engineering.
- ☐ Computer engineering.
- ☐ Accounting.
- ☐ Healthcare.
- ☐ Manufacturing management.

Specialization programs are nice from the standpoint that they signal your dedication to a particular field. Recruiters from those areas tend to like that level of dedication, so if you're comfortable aligning yourself with a particular industry or function, you should consider specializing. Naturally, the flip side is that you are narrowing your business focus rather than broadening it. Also, specialization programs can sometimes be more difficult to gain acceptance to than their general management counterparts. Nonetheless, participants in these programs who have a clear career direction consistently speak highly about their experiences.

So there you have it; a whole world of opportunity from which you can select. It is of course a big decision to make. But once you make the decision to apply, we'll be there the rest of the way.

FAQs

How specific should I be in discussing my career goals?

Simply espousing generalities with regard to your career goals will not win you the gold. While you don't have to state that you want to be CEO of a specific company within five years, it is important that you convey a career direction in your application. Establishing a direction shows that you know what you want to get out of business school and aren't simply trying to boost your salary. As a general rule, you should be as specific as you feel comfortable discussing. In other words, don't discuss a career path in your application that you can't speak intelligently about. Overall, your career goals should make sense in the context of your application story and should be compelling, answering the question of why you want an MBA to pursue that career path. You should also be able to discuss how your career goals will have an impact on an industry, individuals, or society in general.

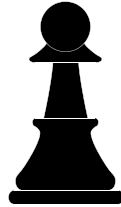
What if I'm not sure what my career goals are?

Use the application preparation process to gain a better understanding of your talents and ambitions. Talk to your friends and family about what they see you doing and match that with your background. Refine your ideas as you study business school curricula until you have your application story. Odds are that by the end of the business school application process you will have a much clearer picture of what your career goals are. After you get admitted to the school of your dreams, you can change your aspirations as many times as you please, but you don't want the admissions committee to view you as an aimless vagabond. This is particularly true if you come from a less business-oriented background, in which case having a concrete story for why an MBA makes sense for you is even more critical than for a typical applicant.

2



THE FOUR DIMENSIONS OF A PERFECT APPLICANT



Becoming the perfect business school candidate is as much an exercise in understanding and cultivating your relative strengths as it is in identifying and addressing your relative weaknesses. We all have strengths. The main challenge is to reveal your strengths in your applications and convince admissions officers that those strengths aren't outweighed by your weaknesses.

For every Superman there is a kryptonite. For every applicant there is a weakness. That's okay! This is the first reality that must be understood as you develop your position and become the "perfect applicant." Remember, a 780 on the GMAT does not blind admissions officers to generic career goals any more than a great stereo system makes up for a car that looks like a rust bucket. To avoid this type of imbalance, you must express all four dimensions that every business school is in search of.

Leadership	Innovation
Teamwork	Maturity

Leadership

Leadership	Innovation
Teamwork	Maturity

Probably more than anything else, business schools want to be known as institutions that produce leaders in their fields. Admissions committees are therefore in search of applicants who display leadership ability in all facets of their lives. This doesn't mean that you need to have started three new nonprofit organizations or replanted a forest. Candidates

who successfully demonstrate leadership in their applications exhibit how they have provided others with direction, shown initiative, and managed difficult situations in their professional, personal, and academic careers.

It is not enough to merely state that you are a leader, but rather you must provide examples of demonstrated leadership. Ultimately, the admissions committee should identify you as a high potential leader because of supporting details rather than overt statements. A good rule of thumb is “Show, don’t tell.”

Innovation

Leadership	Innovation
Teamwork	Maturity

Innovation is a combination of traditional intellectual ability and creativity. Naturally, the former is reflected in the first line statistics (GMAT and GPA), but admissions committee members are also in search of the latter. Applicants who are visionaries are generally successful in establishing the trait of innovation. Innovation in this case can be as simple as finding a new solution to an everyday business problem. Candidates should strive to deliver application stories that speak to adding something new to their selected career paths, rather than merely becoming middle managers in mindless business conglomerates.

Teamwork

Leadership	Innovation
Teamwork	Maturity

The success that Kellogg has had with integrating teamwork throughout its curriculum has spread over time to the other top business schools. Kellogg’s success with a team-oriented curriculum has been supported by the way in which most companies now operate. Because companies utilize teams for virtually all of their functions, business schools are in search of applicants with strong team skills. A team-oriented attitude is now a baseline expectation of every applicant. This includes basic social skills and a willingness to share successes and take accountability for failures. While top business schools are certainly known for being competitive environments, operating in teams has become an integral part of conducting business, and as such is a key aspect of the business school experience.

Maturity

Leadership	Innovation
Teamwork	Maturity

Work experience has become a vital part of candidates’ applications. On average, admitted applicants to the top business schools have almost five years of full-time work experience. Although there are some applicants who are admitted directly from undergraduate programs, this remains the exception and not the rule. More important than the length of one’s work experience, however, is the quality and depth of that experience.

Top business schools are in search of candidates who present multilayered experiences inside and outside of the workplace. An important aspect of the business school experience is that students teach one another based on their backgrounds. It is often said that everyone at business school, including faculty, are both teachers and students. Admissions committees therefore try to identify “mature” candidates who display professional maturity and integrity throughout their application.

As an applicant, your goal should be to weave each of these dimensions throughout all of the application components. In general, application components consist of: data sheets, essays, recommendations, resume, transcript, and interview. In Chapter 4, we will step through each of these components in detail and show ways in which successful applicants have expressed the four dimensions.

In order to help you gauge how well your profile supports these dimensions, you should take an inventory of your activities and achievements. This will allow you to identify your strengths and weaknesses and address them accordingly.

Activities and achievements that typically support the four dimensions include:

Community Service

Over time, community service has slowly transitioned from a “nice-to-have” to a “must-have” on the application. During feedback sessions with rejected applicants, admissions committee members have been known to bring it up as a reason for their decision. It should be stressed, however, that this is a quality (not quantity) activity. You shouldn’t merely write down every humanitarian act that you’ve ever performed. Nor should you try to join half a dozen community service organizations to desperately demonstrate that you have a heart. Rather, it is important to show that you have aspirations of helping society as a whole and not just your personal bank account. Your goal should be to demonstrate deep impact through a few activities, not broad impact across several. Community service is a great way to express all of the four dimensions, but it can especially be powerful in communicating maturity and leadership abilities.

GMAT Score

While your GMAT score alone will never get you into a business school, it certainly can keep you out. As a general rule, if your score falls below a school’s middle 80 percent range of scores, you will have to fight an uphill battle in order to be considered a contender. On the flip side, a GMAT score close to a school’s mean indicates that you have the intellectual horsepower to excel in the business school classroom. Naturally, achieving a strong score on the GMAT gives you points in the innovation department. To avoid having to overcome a low score, you should review our section on the GMAT in Chapter 4.

Hobbies and Extracurricular Activities

Any hobby that can support one of the dimensions or give the admissions committee insight into your personality is worth mentioning. At the end of the day, business schools are looking to admit people, not numbers, and discussing hobbies is a great way to differentiate yourself from the competition. These activities can also display your strengths in areas such as teamwork and innovation. As such, it isn’t really important what the hobby is, but rather what the hobby says about you as an applicant. Do you like fly fishing? Great. Now tell the admissions committee why.

International and Cultural Exposure

As the trend of globalization continues and the world gets smaller, business schools are in search of applicants who will have world impact. Use the application process as a platform to reveal your foreign language skills, multi-national experiences, and cultural awareness. Examples of this can be as grandiose as leading a business unit through a global merger across three continents, or as simple as working with a group of individuals with diverse professional and educational backgrounds. In general, including international or cultural experiences displays a willingness to explore beyond your comfort zone. In effect, it will help you to support the maturity and teamwork dimensions.

Professional Experience

For most applicants, professional experience will be the primary driver of the application. It will permeate the essays, recommendations, interviews, and resume. Because it has such wide-ranging usage, it should be utilized to support all four dimensions.

Undergraduate and Graduate Transcripts

Although your undergraduate and graduate transcripts can't be altered, you can emphasize different aspects of them to support your position. Perhaps you took myriad courses outside of your major during undergrad. You could use that multi-discipline approach to support your desire to attend a business school that focuses on general management. Naturally, a high Grade Point Average (GPA) helps to support the innovation dimension and indicates your ability to succeed in a rigorous academic environment.

Analyzing Your Strengths and Weaknesses

Odds are, you have some notable strengths that will make you a solid student and worthy contributor in business school, but you also have some weaknesses that might keep you out of your ideal school if they go unaddressed. That puts you in a pool that includes probably 99 percent of all business school applicants. This section will show you how to systematically identify and capitalize on your strengths while rooting out and neutralizing your weaknesses.

The grid

Surprisingly, many applicants don't spend any time analyzing or even just writing down their strengths and weaknesses. This might seem like a trivial task—especially because you know yourself better than anyone—but remember that your goal is to sell yourself to someone whose only contact with you is through your application and possibly a 30-minute interview. Therefore, you need to organize your thoughts and make sure that you know exactly what traits you will emphasize for the admissions committee.

It helps to start by drawing out the four dimensions and activity/achievement categories in a grid, like the one on the following page.

Start with an empty grid

Activities/Achievements	Characteristics			
	Leadership	Innovation	Teamwork	Maturity
Community Service				
GMAT Score				
Hobbies and Extracurricular Activities				
International/Cultural Exposure				
Professional Experience				
Transcript(s)				

Next, list your activities and achievements, according to the categories, that bring out one or more of the dimensions. This process shouldn't happen in one 10-minute session. Rather, it will likely take a few minutes here and there as other activities and achievements come to mind. The process might stretch over days or even weeks. Some things to think about when you are looking into your past are:

- ☐ What extracurricular activities did you participate in while in college? What did you volunteer for? What positions were you elected to?
- ☐ How have you gotten involved in your community since graduating from college? What have you enjoyed about these experiences? What have you learned that you didn't learn in school or on the job?
- ☐ What do you like to do in your spare time? What do you enjoy about each of these things? How have they helped you gain a new perspective or exercise your creative side?
- ☐ Where have you traveled? What languages do you know? What have you learned from your friends of different backgrounds?
- ☐ What have you done on the job that might exhibit one or more of the four desired dimensions? Did you lead a team, identify a problem and find a creative solution, deal with a problematic coworker, and achieve a goal that no one thought was possible?
- ☐ What about your undergraduate academic experience might stand out? Did you study abroad or develop your own independent study? Did you dedicate yourself to one academic field, or did you pursue multiple interests? What awards did you receive?

Start by being fairly generous with yourself. Put everything that comes to mind in the grid. You can pare down the overlaps and the weaker examples later on. Also, you may have participated in some activities that don't fit neatly into any of the above categories. As long as they help bring out one of the four main dimensions that you want to demonstrate, include them. You can create a catch-all "other" category if needed.

When you are done, your grid may look like an expanded version of this:

Activities/Achievements	Characteristics			
	Leadership	Innovation	Teamwork	Maturity
Community Service				
Volunteer at a local soup kitchen				X
Founded a student group that assists the elderly	X	X		X
GMAT Score				
High quantitative score		X		
Hobbies and Extracurricular Activities				
Writing		X		X
Photography		X		X
Play keyboard for a small jazz band	X	X	X	X
International/Cultural Exposure				
Conversant in Spanish				X
Participant on a global project team			X	X
Professional Experience				
Developed a strategic plan to enter a new market	X	X		
Led a team in implementing a new technology	X		X	
Led internal training for new hires	X			X
Transcript(s)				
Difficult course load in quantitative areas		X		
Graduated with honors		X		

Note that you will likely have more Xs in some categories than in others. That’s perfectly fine. The idea is not to have a completely full grid, but rather to use the grid as a tool for visualizing what your strengths and weaknesses are. Hopefully, your activities and achievements will complement each other and help fill in each column of the table to some degree, but don’t worry if this doesn’t happen when you first fill it out.

Also note that some activities may only demonstrate one dimension while others may demonstrate three or four of them. That doesn’t mean that the former is less valuable than the latter. Keep in mind that the most important thing is to adequately demonstrate all four desired dimensions. An activity that provides your only strong example of leadership may end up being the most important piece of your application story, rather than one of many activities that show that you demonstrated all four dimensions moderately well.

After you are confident that you have covered everything in your background that is relevant to your application, start to trim the list if needed. If you have 10 examples that demonstrate teamwork, try to evaluate them through an admissions officer’s eyes and rank them from most important to least important. The question you should ask yourself in order to rank them should be, “How effectively does this achievement or activity demonstrate what I am trying to show?” It’s tempting to include “glamorous” examples over more common ones, but being one small part of a CEO’s task force on cost-cutting may do less to show off your traits than having led a lower-profile team within your own department.

Also look for activities and achievements that overlap. If you have done four things that all demonstrate leadership and maturity, you won't need to mention all four of them in your application. Just one or two will do.

What to Do About Your Weaknesses

In the event that you look at one row or column of your grid and see a lot of white space, don't panic! Most applicants will encounter this challenge. Remember that the table isn't the end, but rather it is the means for identifying what you might need to work on while you build your application.

Following are some areas where applicants typically have some holes in their grids, and some ideas for bolstering your position in each.

Community service

Not everyone has done a lot of community service, and it can be tempting to want to volunteer for five nonprofit organizations in the weeks leading up to your application deadline. Admissions committees can see right through this, however, so don't waste your time in a last-ditch attempt to look "involved."

If you simply do not have any community service activities to point to, look for other activities in your background that will demonstrate similar characteristics. Starting a volleyball club at the local gym won't solve world hunger, but it still shows that you like to get involved and can motivate others to do the same. If you find that your application is still lacking the altruistic angle that a community service activity might demonstrate, then make sure to bring out your human side in other ways, such as more subtle examples of how you helped a family member or someone on the job solve a problem. The bottom line is that you want to show that you like to get involved in the community around you, and that you are more than a GMAT score and fancy resume.

If you still have time before you begin the application process, be on the lookout for community service opportunities. Mentoring programs such as Big Brothers Big Sisters are great ways to show your willingness to give back to the community.

GMAT score

The good news about the GMAT is that it is one of the few achievements that you can work on and improve in a short amount of time (compared to community service or an undergraduate transcript from five years ago). The bad news is that some applicants can spend months studying for it and still fall short of their goal. If your GMAT score makes you look weak in the quantitative or verbal departments, be sure to bring out other examples in your application that will counterbalance these weaknesses.

If your quantitative score is low, highlight any tough analytical courses that you took as an undergrad. Or show how you use your quantitative skills to unravel tough problems on the job, or even as part of a volunteer opportunity in which you participated. Remember that demonstrating an analytical skill set doesn't have to mean showing that you know calculus. There are practical, everyday activities that can help you demonstrate your comfort with using numbers to make decisions. The bottom line is that

you just need to show that you won't be helpless two weeks into your first-year finance course.

If your verbal score is low, then you will need to work extra hard to highlight your communication skills. You can do this through your essays and your interviews.

You can also enlist support from your recommenders, to address weaknesses in both the quantitative and/or verbal section. If your undergraduate transcript and your job don't help, consider enrolling in a statistics, finance, public speaking, or accounting course in a local community college. This shows a dedication to education and will impress the admissions committees. Many business schools are happy to suggest what kinds of courses they would consider as useful preparation for their programs.

Hobbies and extracurricular activities

This is usually the part of the application that gives applicants the least amount of trouble, as most of us have enough interests to keep us busy outside of school or work. Look at how your hobbies relate to your other activities, and they hopefully will provide a well-rounded picture of you as a person. If you already have the four desired dimensions covered reasonably well by your other activities and achievements, then use your hobbies as a way to provide a little extra depth and color to your application. If your hobbies don't add anything new, then de-emphasize them and let the other parts of your application stand on their own.

International and cultural exposure

For many people, this is a clear-cut have-or-don't-have issue. If you haven't worked, studied, or traveled abroad, don't despair. Business schools like to see experience in this area, but realize that not everyone has had a chance to see the world. If this is the case for you, be sure to emphasize the success that you have had in working with people of various backgrounds or even different points of view from your own. Even two people from the same school who work for the same company have a lot of differences between them. Show how you have overcome these differences to build success, and, even more importantly, demonstrate that you value these opportunities to grow and push yourself outside of your normal comfort zone.

Professional experience

People who worry about their professional experience are usually concerned with either the quality or quantity of the work that they have done. If you are worried about the amount of work experience that you have, take comfort in the fact that many business schools are reversing a decade-old trend and are actually pursuing younger applicants. They will still be interested in you as long as you have demonstrated success on the job, increased responsibility in your assignments, and a true understanding of what an MBA can do for you. If you are still an undergrad and are looking to go right into business school, your best chances of demonstrating leadership and maturity will be in your extracurricular activities and anything else where you took charge and made something happen outside of the classroom.

Quality issues around work experience can be tough, but can also be overcome. Have you stagnated in your job? Think about why this has happened and how an MBA will help you address the issue. Maybe you have hit a plateau in your career because you lack important managerial skills that an MBA will give you. The important thing in this case is to demonstrate that your lack of upward mobility does not correspond to a lack of ambition or aptitude for success.

Does your work not seem interesting or exciting enough? Don't worry too much about this issue, as business schools love people from a variety of backgrounds. Being a foreman at a corrugated box factory may seem dull to you, but if you can highlight what you have learned about business on the job—and what you still have to learn—then you can make a strong case for yourself.

Some applicants have holes in their work records, as they took sabbaticals to travel, to care for a sick loved one, or to simply try new things. As long as you can convince the admissions committee that you are indeed ambitious and committed to studying business, they will appreciate the unique perspectives that these experiences will give you.

Undergraduate and graduate transcripts

If your transcript shows weakness, don't worry. Not all "weak" transcripts are equally bad, and there are some things you can do to help yourself.

A Stanford admissions officer once said about transcripts, "We're forgiving of slow starts, but not as forgiving of slow finishes." Most business schools have the same attitude. If you got off to a rough start your freshman year but showed steady improvement while in college, then you are probably in good shape. Admissions officers like to see that you got more serious about your work and were able to turn the academic tide.

If you were consistently poor or did worse as time went on, however, your challenge will be to convince the admissions committee that you're serious about academics and have the brainpower to succeed in school. The former can be accomplished in your essays, where you will discuss what it is that you expect to get out of a business school curriculum. The latter can be made up for by the GMAT or, if that is also weak, by earning *As* in part-time courses at a local school.

Your transcript(s) may also be weak because you were simply too involved in extra-curricular activities as an undergrad. Use this opportunity to turn a weakness into a strength by demonstrating your commitment and initiative at your undergraduate school, and making the case for why you will be equally involved in business school. You must balance that out, however, with a demonstrated understanding of the importance of academics in business school. In other words, you should try and convince the admissions counselors that you will get the school/activities mix right this time around.

Final Word on Strengths and Weaknesses

In general, your strategy should be to counteract your perceived weaknesses with examples that show your strengths in those same (or similar) areas. The more that each part of your application can naturally complement and support the other pieces, the better off you will be. Some applicants will use the extra essay—which many schools

provide as an option in their applications—to directly address a weakness such as a low GMAT score or undergraduate GPA. This is fine, but think of it as a last resort. One risk of devoting an entire essay to a weakness is that it highlights the very issue that you’re trying to neutralize. There are times when the extra essay does help, however, and we will discuss these types of situations more in Chapter 4.

Conversation With Alex Brown

Alex Brown, Senior Associate Director of MBA Admissions at The Wharton School, has become one of the best-known personalities among business school applicants over the last several years. He has developed a reputation for being quick to respond to applicants’ questions with candid advice through BusinessWeek’s online b-school forums and through Wharton’s own applicant-focused message board, known as student-2-student. We checked in with Alex to get his opinion on some of the best and worst things that business school applicants typically do.

What are some of the major mistakes that you see applicants make year after year?

Good applicants not presenting good applications. While that is a very general answer, it gets to the core of the issue. Specifically, I think one major error is not researching the school and understanding what the particular school offers, and how it fits the goals of the candidate. It’s fine for us to learn that you are a strong candidate in general, but we are also looking for those who show good fit and who can make the most of our resources and learning culture. Those that have not done their homework on the school are sending a negative signal. This does not imply that there is only one right school for each candidate. There should be a “choice set” that is relevant to the candidate’s goals, learning style, etc.

What do you look for in trying to distinguish between applicants with very similar professional backgrounds?

A deep understanding of how the MBA is relevant and the potential outcomes of the MBA, aside from the notion that it needs to be done to get ahead in that particular industry. We also look for how the candidate’s overall profile, which includes interests outside of work, will add to the learning community of the school. Oftentimes, it is these interests and passions, and how they manifest themselves, that will be the key differentiator of someone with strong academics, a strong career, and a solid plan going forward.

What is your take on the GMAT exam, its importance and use by an admissions committee? What do applicants need to do to get in with a relatively low GMAT score?

It’s all relative. Like all aspects of the application, it is important. (By the way, the weakest element of any application will be the most critical for each applicant, and for some that will be the GMAT.) The recent increases in GMAT scores at schools should not lead candidates to believe we focus more on the GMAT than we used to do. The reasons for the increases are simply that there are more resources available for people

to prepare for the test, and the fact that the test is more flexible in terms of when it can be taken (this is not universal, which we understand). Given the increased ability to be fully prepared when taking the test, candidates are doing so. I would say that what we are seeing is candidates maximizing their potential GMAT score, and I do not think that was always the case.

The GMAT scores we publish are averages, so clearly we admit people with scores below that number. The score itself will be reviewed within the context of an applicant's academic work, and our goal is to admit people who will thrive in our academic curriculum. That will then allow students to be more involved in the overall program. In order for us to "look past" low GMAT scores, the scores must be due to demonstrated poor standardized test-taking, supported by strong academics, not due to lack of preparation for the test, which is a clear demonstration of lack of commitment to the application process and respect for the applicant pool.

We hear admissions committee members talk about looking for fit when evaluating applicants. What exactly does that mean? What helps you determine if someone will fit in at Wharton?

Fit can follow a couple of themes: fit for the learning culture and fit for the school's resources. Each school will have a certain learning culture that determines the spirit, attitude, and future direction of the school. We need to make sure we admit people that will fit into the culture that Wharton has developed. If we admit people who would not excel in that culture, the culture itself would change over time.

Fit also refers to how the student fits into the resources of the school (academic and extracurricular) and the goals of the student. Clearly, if the goals of the student going into the program are unrealistic given the school's resources, there is a disconnection.

Some candidates seem to place more importance on one aspect of the application over another. Is there one part of the application that you consistently see applicants falling short on?

I think this may vary based on the culture of the applicant. Some international cultures are less assertive in terms of expressing their qualities, passions, and interests, and simply approach the process as they would approach writing their resume. While we understand this, a candidate knows if he is applying to a U.S.-based school, so the candidate should learn how to approach U.S. schools more appropriately perhaps. Rather than simply listing accomplishments and experiences in essays, an applicant should discuss the outcomes and the learning opportunities, plus how these experiences have helped shape value systems, leadership perspectives, and team skills, for example.

What makes a really good essay? What makes a really bad one?

I want to get a sense that I really know the person after reading the essays. Don't just write what you think we want to hear, but tell it the way it is, centered on knowing some of the core themes we are looking for and of course answering the questions. A recent discussion on student-2-student referred to a candidate getting naked through

the essays. While this may sound extreme, the attitude and approach makes sense. We are about transparency in our process and communications. We want our candidates to be similarly transparent.

How important is an applicant's enthusiasm for the program? Can you tell when an applicant is simply applying to Wharton along with every other top school, without really getting to know Wharton's program?

We know candidates apply to multiple schools, and there is nothing wrong with that. Our attitude is less, "Are we your first choice?" and more, "Are we a good choice?" Make that case and we are happy. How does Wharton fit your goals, given our resources, our culture, etc.? We hope that our marketing resources can help you understand exactly what our culture and resources are, and that you can make an effective case. Help us picture you sitting in a classroom at Wharton, or running a club here.

Any other pearls of wisdom?

I am passionate about what an MBA at Wharton can do for many different types of people. Don't be intimidated by the process of applying. Use it as a chance to really find what is right for you. While our stats may be intimidating to some, they are only stats. We look at much, much more.

FAQs

How important is the strength of your undergraduate/graduate school's brand to the admissions committee?

Overall, what you did in college and what you've done since then are more important than what school you went to. Still, business schools do take your college's brand name into consideration, especially when considering your grades. Some schools are known to pay more attention to this than others. However, this should not be a major consideration when you apply. For every Princeton and Yale grad prowling the halls of these schools, there is also a student from a lesser-known school. All schools love to brag about the number of undergraduate institutions that are represented by their classes (the numbers generally range from 80 to 200). You definitely shouldn't spend all of your time trying to sell your school if it is not a well-known one. You should, however, be able to explain why you decided to attend the schools listed on your transcripts and discuss their merits. Outside of that, try to keep the focus on you. At the same time, if you did go to a college with a great reputation, don't rest on your laurels and expect to gain admission based on reputation alone. It's an asset, but one that will quickly fall by the wayside if your other application components are mediocre.

What if I have been laid off from my job?

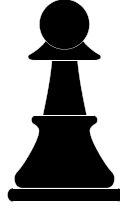
First of all, don't panic! Getting laid off does not squash your chances of getting into a top business school. There are several things that you need to do. Most importantly, you need to convince the admissions committee that you're not simply applying to business school because you're out of work and have no better option. If admissions

officers sense that this is the case, then you will indeed have squashed your chances. You can combat this perception by highlighting your career goals, and how business school fits into the picture. Also, while you absolutely should not dwell on the fact that you were laid off, acknowledge that it happened and be prepared to explain why (hopefully it's something out of your control), and move on. Admissions officers understand that even good employees sometimes lose their jobs.

Also, you will need to work extra hard to weave professional success stories throughout your application, to make it clear that you are a “winner” who just happened to get caught up in bad circumstances. Recommendations are especially important here, particularly if they come from your ex-boss who regrettably had to let you go. Showing that you were a positive contributor and that you left on good terms will help a great deal. Finally, show that you've been productive in your time off. A Tuck admissions officer once commented that she couldn't believe how some laid-off applicants were content to do nothing for a year. Even things outside of your career such as pro-bono work or volunteering can show that you're not someone who's content to sit back and take it when life deals you a bad hand.

3

APPLICANT PROFILES



What you communicate in your application will be largely dictated by who you are and where you want to go in your career. However, where you've been speaks volumes about you, particularly in the eyes of business school admissions officers. If you are an investment banker, for example, they will assume that you have more in common with other banking applicants than with military or nonprofit applicants. This means that absent information that you tell admissions committees about yourself, they may assume that you have many of the traits (both positive and negative) that a typical banker has. It is your responsibility to be aware of these commonly held stereotypes and be ready to take advantage of them or overcome them, whatever the case may be.

While business schools rarely say so explicitly, it makes sense that your stiffest competition will come from those who are most like you. Schools don't necessarily operate off of hard quotas when admitting applicants with various professional backgrounds, but they can only take so many consultants, or so many accountants, marketers, educators, etc., before their classes start to become homogenous. So, you will be compared to other applicants with similar backgrounds, and your job will be to stand apart from these other applicants. This is a core part of any winning application game plan.

This chapter will help you achieve this goal. We will examine 11 of the most common applicant profiles (by profiles we mean professional backgrounds), name some perceived strengths and weaknesses for each, and discuss ways that an applicant with a given profile can set himself apart from others with the same background. Naturally, much of the advice that applies to one applicant profile may apply to another. Also, there's a good chance that you don't fit explicitly into one of these profiles. For example, many engineers go into consulting or investment banking. Still, getting a sense of how admissions counselors think about various profiles will help you in creating your differentiated position. We recommend using this chapter in conjunction with your strengths/weaknesses analysis from Chapter 2 to develop your application strategy. Above all else, your application needs to reflect who you are. Beyond that, use the material presented here to separate yourself from the pack.

Consulting

In many ways, consultants are made for business school. As a consultant, you most likely have a strong academic background, have had multiple experiences with myriad companies, and have finely tuned analytical and interpersonal skills. Additionally, you have direct access to a cadre of b-school graduates through your firm, who serve as great advisors.

Unfortunately, more applicants fall into the consultant category than probably any other profile type. As a result, it is also probably more difficult to differentiate yourself as a consultant. Consulting firms often have standardized analyst programs that “feed” business schools with applicants after they’ve had two or three years of experience. Over time, many b-schools have become somewhat wary of these programs, because of their tendency to produce applicants who are simply looking to “get their ticket punched.”

You can avoid the perception that you’re just trying to get your ticket punched by being explicit about how you intend to utilize an MBA to reach your career goals. That’s not to say that you shouldn’t express an interest in returning to consulting. But if you do go down that path, you need to make sure to discuss how you see yourself having an impact on the organization. Do you see an opportunity to increase your clients’ revenues through Customer Relationship Management? Then discuss how you want to capitalize on this opportunity by studying the intersection of marketing and technology. The bottom line is that you have to provide tangible reasons for wanting to attend b-school. In many ways, if you intend to return to consulting, this is even more important than if you’re planning on switching careers.

Along the lines of being explicit in your writing, try your best not to introduce consultant jargon into your essays and interviews. Consultants have a tendency to write essays that are high-level and ambiguous. Admissions counselors comment that consultants often fail to adequately explain their specific actions on projects and the results of those actions. To the extent that you can quantify both, you will stand out from the pack. Take a close look at Chapter 4 for additional guidance on how to write and interview effectively.

The average number of years of work experience at top business schools approaches five. Consultants, however, tend to apply to schools after only two to four years of experience. If you fall into this group, then you should expect to be questioned about it and should find ways to emphasize your maturity. One way to do that is by discussing activities in which you are involved outside of consulting. Because of the long hours associated with their profession, many applicants from consulting are unable to talk about anything that is unrelated to work. To the extent that you are able to weave activities outside of the consulting world into your story, you will be able to differentiate yourself.

Creative

If this header describes you, then you are what business schools and their students like to call a “poet.” Whether you were previously a teacher, psychologist, musician, writer, chef, artist, or anything else that falls into this category, you bring something to the applicant pool that few others do. The trick will be to appear different enough to be interesting, but not so different that admissions officers will suspect that you can’t hack it or fit in with your more business-minded peers.

First of all, don’t let anyone tell you that you have no business applying. The fact that you want an MBA makes you qualified to apply. Whether or not you get in is up to the admissions counselors, but what they decide will be greatly influenced by how well you craft your application. Your past is history, but how you present it is entirely up to you.

When you describe your past experiences, don’t simply write or talk about what you did. Go a level deeper and talk about why you have done these things. For instance, a sculptor got into a top business school by describing the satisfaction he got from turning his ideas into something of substance. He then effectively tied it back to business, describing how he wanted to acquire the tools to do the same thing for business ideas. You don’t need to be this explicit in tying your background to business (especially if it will end up sounding forced), but try to think in this way as you develop your application game plan. Admissions officers will value you for the unique perspective that you can bring to the classroom, but it’s up to you to show that you can connect the dots and apply your non-business experiences to business problems.

Most schools look for leadership skills more than anything else, and odds are that you’ve had a chance to display these skills at some point in your life. The more recent, the better, but don’t be afraid to bring up examples of how you uniquely made a difference in a situation when you were younger. Even if the story has nothing to do with business, leadership examples are universal, and your application will be much stronger for it. Your recommendations can be helpful here, especially if you can get people with business backgrounds to vouch for your leadership skills and business potential.

Of course, business schools also look for a minimum level of quantitative skills, and this is one place where you won’t get the benefit of the doubt. You absolutely must produce a GMAT score within range of your target schools’ averages. Your best bet is to practice early and practice often, and give yourself enough time to take the exam more than once if needed. And plan on taking some pre-MBA courses in accounting and statistics before you apply. Doing so will demonstrate a sincere interest in earning an MBA, and answer questions in admissions officers’ minds about you possibly applying to school as a dilettante who has nothing better to do. Taking these courses early will allow you to sell them in your application.

Entrepreneurship

Few applicants can say that they’ve built their own business, giving entrepreneurs a leg up in the business school admissions process. If you are an entrepreneur, the key will be to drive home the strengths that admissions officers typically associate with people

like you, while addressing the questions of why you want a degree now and how well you will fit into the business school culture. Here we use the term “entrepreneur” broadly. As such, our advice can apply to people who have set out to build organizations in a variety of fields, from technology to hospitality to nonprofit.

By definition, entrepreneurs are people who like to strike out on their own and make things happen. It doesn’t take much imagination to see how you can spin a story rich in leadership, creativity, and ambition, no matter what your venture was. Whether you built a whole organization or simply started up a new department within an existing company, you should have a lot of material to draw upon. When you discuss these experiences, be sure to not only talk about your accomplishments, but also about how you achieved them. Saying that you led your fledgling team to launch its first prototype on time is impressive, but it’s more interesting to hear about how it happened. Stories about how you found the right people to build your team, how you motivated them, and how you helped them overcome obstacles will all paint a great portrait of you as a leader.

The most obvious challenge you will face is that you already set out to build a business, and only now are you applying to business school. Admissions officers will undoubtedly ask, “If you thought you could make it on your own two years ago, how come you now feel like you need to sit in a classroom and learn again?” Your reasons will obviously depend on your own situation, but a stronger answer will emphasize your desire to learn and move toward new goals, while a weaker one will focus on your desire to get away from the start-up scene.

The flipside of your perceived strengths is that an admissions committee may wonder if you have too much hubris for your own good. The key is for you to communicate your appreciation for rigorous business training and to spell out exactly what skills you want to attain and why. Admissions officers don’t like to see someone who’s too much of a maverick. You will need to demonstrate your penchant for teamwork, ideally through some of your past actions.

So far we have skirted the issue of whether or not your past ventures have been successful. Of course, it will be much easier to sell yourself if you have a long track record of success to point to, but you can also use failures to your advantage. The challenge will be to make sure that your business school application doesn’t look like a “last resort” now that your entrepreneurial efforts haven’t panned out. By emphasizing that you understand what went wrong and that you are now actively seeking learning opportunities in order to shore up your skills before you make another go at it, you can pull together a nice application story.

Engineering and Science

Engineers (here we will use “engineers” to refer to anyone coming from a science or engineering background) typically have strong quantitative skills, and that is one reason why you will find a good number of engineers at any top business school. Coming from engineering, however, you will find that you need to sell your interpersonal skills, and prove that you understand the “big picture” when it comes to business.

Few engineers ever fail to make the cut in business school admissions because of their quantitative abilities. Even if you don't have a superlative GMAT score, you should be able to point to your undergraduate degree and recent work experience as evidence of these skills. Even better, you will hopefully be able to demonstrate strong problem-solving skills by virtue of the work you've done. Even if your past experiences seem ho-hum to you, an admissions officer will be interested to hear how you solved an important problem, and why you went about it in the way that you did. A good example can be as mundane as improving the flow rate through a valve by 2 percent, or contributing to a small enhancement in the efficacy of a new drug. Being explicit about the significance of the problem—and which of your skills helped you arrive at the solution—will go a long way toward selling these abilities.

Many business-minded engineers also enjoy the advantage of having a good overall story for why they want to earn an MBA. Whereas a consultant or an investment banker may have to spend a lot of time proving that she isn't just getting her ticket punched for a higher salary, you can craft a strong story about how you've mastered one discipline, and now you want to move on to achieve a broader view of how a business is run. Admissions officers will appreciate any evidence that you can provide that shows you understand the importance of the functions in a company outside of its R&D department.

The stereotype that you will most likely have to overcome is in regard to your interpersonal skills. An admissions committee will look critically for evidence that you can reach goals that require you to work with others. Any teamwork examples that you can provide will help you a great deal here; particularly stories that demonstrate your ability to understand others' motivations and to deal with them constructively. These "empathy" examples will go a long way toward showing your ability to grow into the role of a leader.

You can also set yourself apart through extracurricular activities that demonstrate your interests outside of the workplace. They can show your desire to actively seek out opportunities to make the world around you better, rather than simply waiting for an engineering problem to be handed to you. Examples of community service, volunteering at your church, or simply pursuing a creative or athletic passion outside of the office will help you distinguish yourself from the other engineers in the crowd.

Government

One of the better known business school graduates of the last decade—Peter Robinson, author of *Snapshots from Hell: The Making of an MBA*—was a White House speech writer before entering Stanford. In his book, Robinson describes being told that he and his non-business-background classmates were the ones who were added to the class to add some variety. It's to your advantage that you bring this variety to the table, and it can help you a great deal if you are able to overcome what the top schools expect your weaknesses to be.

Whether you frequently dined on Air Force One or served as your town's dog-catcher, you can build your application story knowing that most other applicants will have far less unique stories to tell. You can start by emphasizing your strong principles

and passion for making a difference. Business schools love people who are committed to making an impact wherever they go, and they know that people who have worked in government tend to exhibit this trait. No matter what specific field you worked in, or at what level, make sure that this passion and dedication are a central part of your application story.

You may also have excellent examples that demonstrate your interpersonal skills and communication abilities. To some degree, both will come through on their own in your essays and your interview, but be sure to explicitly sell these abilities at some point. Any examples of past successes where you put these skills to use will only help in winning over admissions officers.

One of the most common weaknesses of applicants coming from the public sector is a lack of quantitative skills. Government-types have a reputation for being great with words but less so with numbers, and you will need to overcome this stereotype with supporting evidence. If your past jobs included any kind of work with numbers, such as fundraisers, budgeting, or research, then be sure to mention it. You should also show a minimum level of comfort with quantitative problem-solving through the other common tools (GMAT, undergraduate coursework, and/or pre-MBA courses). Similarly, you will need to answer questions about your business experience, or lack thereof. Admissions officers are often willing to accept a lack of business experience as long as you can communicate an understanding of the value of business training and how it will help you. By communicating both messages, you will be able to help set yourself apart from other government employees. Additionally, you should convey a clear vision for how an MBA will help you and why.

Also, emphasize your desire to innovate and make things happen. Many government applicants will have impressive stories to share about their past experiences, but the most successful ones will present a convincing argument for how an MBA will help them shake up the status quo.

International

Clearly the international applicant (that is, international from the perspective of the 27 U.S. schools covered in this book) profile will overlap with at least one other profile. Still, it is invaluable for international applicants to understand how they are viewed by admissions counselors, based on their geographical status alone.

It should be stated up front that business schools are eager to maintain, or, in some cases, increase the percentage of their international students. B-schools and students find that having a large international presence is the best way to expand students' perspectives beyond ethnocentrism. It's an amazing experience to sit in a classroom and hear voices from around the world weigh in on a variety of issues. This alone ensures that business schools will continue to enthusiastically pursue international applicants for the foreseeable future. Still, there remains a gap in access to information on the business school application process in terms of domestic versus international applicants. At a holistic level, our hope is that this book contributes to minimizing that gap. At a more tactical level, however, it is important for international applicants to understand the stereotypical strengths and weaknesses with which they are automatically associated.

On the strengths side of the equation, a guaranteed plus is your cultural awareness. Interestingly, this tends to be a latent strength for international applicants on which they don't capitalize enough. As an international applicant, you're used to living in a truly global world and being exposed to various cultures, languages, and belief systems, so you accept this as a norm and don't emphasize these types of experiences as much as you should. Realize that the ability to speak several languages or dialects and expound on the social impacts of introducing economic liberalization policies is something most American applicants do not bring to the table. As such, demonstrate to the admissions committee your experiences in multicultural environments in order to show them how adding your voice to the classroom dialogue will appreciably improve the learning model.

Additionally, consider integrating your global perspective into your career goals. Your past cross-cultural experiences will lend career goals that extend beyond U.S. boundaries, a level of credibility that most American applicants will not be able to achieve. In terms of the ability to have a global impact, most international applicants have a natural advantage.

The lack of access to information on the application process reveals itself in a majority of applications from international candidates. In general, international applicants tend to produce applications that read more like records of accomplishments than stories. This hurts these applicants' chances of getting into b-school. The best way to put together an application that positively resonates with admissions officers is by reviewing application components produced by successful applicants and by understanding the admissions criteria of your target schools. To avoid the trap of obsessing over baseline GMAT, Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), and GPA statistics, you should live and breathe Chapters 4 and 5. These chapters go through each of the application components in great detail and outline strategies for gaining acceptance to top business schools. Make sure that you review each of the examples in order to gain an understanding of how admissions counselors will evaluate your application. Having a good understanding of how to assemble an application that tells a story, rather than an application that rattles off your achievements, is a great way to separate yourself from other international applicants.

One of the questions that admissions counselors will ask themselves when reviewing applications from international candidates is whether they will take the initiative to share their perspectives with their classmates. There is a common understanding that as an international applicant you have a unique perspective, but in the admissions committee's eyes that perspective is worthless if it isn't shared. The best way to address this question is to provide examples of instances in which you've provided your perspective in a multicultural environment. Better yet, emphasize your desire to express your viewpoints during your time in business school. In addition to getting this point across in your essays, it is crucial that you emphasize it during your interviews. This may be your one point of direct contact with the admissions committee, so you definitely want them to be comfortable with having you in the classroom.

Investment Banking and Finance

Business schools love bankers for their business training and analytical skills, and bankers love the schools because they often have no choice but to apply after a few years on the job. Your challenge will be to stand out from a sea of similar-looking applicants. You can do this by defeating the stereotypes that are most often associated with bankers and others coming from finance-related fields, including private equity and venture capital.

Let's start with the good news. As an investment banker, you will probably have to do very little selling of your business abilities. Schools will assume that you come with at least enough analytical skills to hack it in an MBA program. They will also expect that you are comfortable with big-picture business concepts and have enough polish to make yourself presentable to potential employers. While you should at least provide some evidence of these skills, know that b-schools will generally anticipate that you have these characteristics.

Of course, the hard part will be distinguishing yourself from the other gazillion bankers who also apply. You should therefore focus your story. Discuss not only what makes you a great banker, but on what makes you a *different* banker. To this end, any experiences where you demonstrated leadership and truly made a difference in the outcome of a project will help a great deal. Admissions officers will look hard for examples where you didn't simply follow your job description, but rather went a step further and did something that few others would have done in order to succeed. This can sometimes be difficult in this industry, but that's exactly why business schools value these kinds of experiences so much.

Extracurricular activities can be even more powerful in setting you apart from the pack. Any way in which you can show a desire to get involved and make things happen will distinguish you. Again, schools are looking for examples where you didn't merely do what was asked of you, but rather stepped outside of your comfort zone and made a difference.

One stereotype that you will need to overcome is the one that paints most investment bankers as overly competitive sharks. You most likely have had experiences where you worked with others to execute a deal; don't overlook the importance of these experiences when describing your professional history. As much as an admissions committee looks for a track record of success, it will pay even more attention to how you accomplished those tasks. An applicant who knifed and clawed his way to the top isn't someone whom most schools will welcome with open arms.

Finally, you know—and every school knows—that many bankers apply to business school because they have little choice. That won't be held against you. But you will really need to think about what you plan on doing with an MBA. Whether or not you plan on going back to banking, admissions officers will demand evidence that shows you really understand the value of an MBA, and that you're not simply out to get your ticket punched. Be prepared to discuss your strengths and weaknesses, and how an MBA will help you round out your personal traits and professional skills. To that end, explaining how an MBA will help you make a true difference is a great way

to differentiate yourself from other bankers whose career objectives often come across as conventional.

Marketing

Marketing professionals usually have loads of relevant business experience to highlight in their applications. As a marketing professional, between previous schoolwork and your work experience, you should have ample evidence that shows you know how to get things done in a business setting. The challenge is to bring out the breadth of your business experience, especially when it comes to quantitative and leadership skills.

As a marketer, you will likely have little problem pointing to instances of innovation in your career. Most applicants with marketing backgrounds will have examples of creativity that they can draw upon, but you should think broadly and refer to examples of how you innovated in a variety of business scenarios, whether it was developing a creative new advertising campaign or finding a new solution to an old business problem. Choose broad examples over times when you simply developed a creative brochure or updated the look of your company's Website. Admissions officers will assume that, as a marketer, you have a good deal of creativity. It is up to you to demonstrate creativity in the broader, business-minded sense of the word.

Depending on what you did as a marketer, one challenge you might face is in presenting convincing evidence of your quantitative and analytical skills. Of course, many marketing jobs are quite quantitative, but admissions officers will look hard for proof of these skills. Naturally, the GMAT can go a long way toward making your case. If your GMAT score isn't as high as you would like, make a point of emphasizing the quantitative work that you've done on your job, whether it's analyzing market research data or budgeting for a project. No matter how mundane these experiences may seem, mentioning them can help a great deal. Also, if you didn't do much undergrad work in quantitative subjects, be prepared to take some courses in accounting or statistics before you attend school (or, ideally, before you apply).

Leadership will really help to set you apart from the pack. As someone coming from marketing, you will likely find that you have more teamwork examples to share in your application than many other applicants. Be sure to emphasize your teamwork dimension in discussing these stories. However, in relating your examples, make sure to be clear about what *you* did, rather than only on what the team accomplished. Don't make admissions officers search all day to figure out what you specifically did on a project in order to make it a success. You should get comfortable with the idea of using the word "I" instead of "we" a little more than you're used to.

Also, the fact that you are already in business can actually present a challenge in terms of how you answer the "Why an MBA?" question. You won't necessarily have the obvious answer of wanting to change careers, and not every marketer ends up going to business school (unlike consulting or banking, where leaving for business school is much more common). A skeptical admissions officer or interviewer may probe you on this. Valid reasons for pursuing an MBA can include the fact that you want to gain new, hard skills outside of what you already know, or that you want to bolster your

leadership abilities. Whatever your reasons, be prepared to answer this question and be specific about the skills that you want to gain from an MBA.

Military

Applicants coming from the military are blessed with some of the best stories that anyone could possibly tell in a business school application. Tales of clearing a third-world playground of landmines and of whipping a motley platoon of new recruits into a well-oiled machine are the stuff of admissions officers' dreams. Unfortunately, nearly every military applicant has similarly impressive experiences to draw upon, and not many of these stories explicitly spell out your potential for success at business school.

One of your best strengths as a military applicant will likely be your leadership experience. Any stories that you can relate about directing a group of men and women to achieve a tangible goal will speak volumes about your ability to lead, and most business schools value this trait above all else. You are also likely to have great examples of teamwork, which will further help an admissions committee picture you fitting into a classroom at its school. Don't be shy about sharing these stories, even if you think they've been told a thousand times before. Focus on these accomplishments in your essays and interview, and—more importantly—spell out what you learned as a result, and how it will help you in your next career.

The most obvious challenge you could face is in cases when your great experiences have little to do with business. As a military applicant, you need to show the admissions committee that your skills are directly transferable to the business world. More to the point, you need to show that you see how these skills will translate, and that you know what your own strengths and weaknesses are. You may not know accounting or marketing, but you understand why it is important that you have knowledge of them. Moreover, you can demonstrate your desire to bolster your knowledge in these areas by taking a pre-MBA course. If you have taken any business-oriented courses that won't show up on your transcripts—or have simply embarked on a mission to read one good business book per month—be sure to let the admissions committee know about it. The committee will understand that you're relatively new to the business world, but will look critically for evidence that you have the ability and motivation to learn business principles.

The other challenge you will face is in setting yourself apart from the rest of the military crowd. Most of your fellow military applicants will also have great stories about leadership, teamwork, and problem solving, among others. You can stand out from the pack by demonstrating how you've gotten involved and contributed in situations outside of your military career. Just as a consultant needs to show how he has a life outside of his job, you will need to do the same. Also, many military applicants' leadership stories will be about "direct" leadership, in which there was a clear leader-subordinate hierarchy. Because the business world is often much murkier than this, providing examples of how you succeeded in a less-defined leadership role will further set you apart.

Nonprofit

Some of the most unique members of every business school class tend to come from a nonprofit background. Admissions committees love to round out their incoming student bodies with students who have taken the road less traveled, and as a nonprofit applicant, you can potentially fit this bill quite nicely. First, however, you will need to address the weaknesses that are most commonly associated with applicants coming from the nonprofit sector.

The good news is that you don't need to be shy about your nonprofit background. Just the contrary—even if you didn't gain a bit of “real” business experience during your career, your previous work will likely have given you a unique world perspective that few others can offer. You were willing to take risks with your career in order to make someone else's situation better. Admissions officers love to see passion and strong principles like these. Odds are, you gained some very relevant experience, even if it was as dull as maintaining volunteers' schedules or procuring supplies. The trap that some applicants fall into is in simply stating what they have done, without going two more steps and spelling out what they learned, and how it will help them in their future career. This will be critical because admissions committees will expect a “non-traditional” applicant like you to provide a vision for how you will get the most out of—and give the most to—their schools.

Another place where nonprofit applicants can fall short is in presenting a convincing case that they will be able to blend in and work with consultants, bankers, marketers, etc. While schools will value you for your unique perspective, they want to know that you have enough business sense to be able to contribute to group projects and help move along a class discussion. You can start by showing that you have the intellectual horsepower to stand up to the rigors of the more quantitative subjects. Your GMAT score, past coursework, or pre-MBA courses can help here. Also, you will need to show that you are able to think about broader business concepts, and that you understand their relevance to your career. You can touch upon this subject as you answer the “Why an MBA?” question. Admissions officers will appreciate the candidate who knows what she doesn't know and sees why these skills are important.

Some nonprofit applicants apply to business school in order to change careers, while others want an MBA to help them make a greater impact in their current field. Your game plan won't vary significantly between these two scenarios. The main risk in the case of a career switcher will be in making sure that you have a good understanding of the field that you want to move into. If you plan on going back to the nonprofit sector, then your greatest challenge will be in convincingly spelling out what an MBA will allow you to do that you can't do today. Talking to current MBA students and recent graduates will help you a great deal here.

Recent Graduate

Only a few years ago the trend was for business schools to accept applicants with more and more years of work experience. More recently, however, this trend has been reversed for certain schools, such as Stanford and Harvard. The rationale behind the

reversal is that there are some exemplary undergraduate students and recent graduates who've had phenomenal experiences and, as such, shouldn't have to wait to attend business school.

Just to be clear, it is still very difficult to gain admittance directly from undergrad or with less than two years of work experience. Besides, many students maintain the perspective that b-school is most beneficial for students who have significant professional experience. Indeed, top business schools will most likely keep their student population with less than two years of work experience under 5 percent. They will do so in order to preserve the classroom dynamic, in which all students are expected to take on the role of a teacher. Still, there is now a greater window of opportunity for the young and restless.

What you have going for you is clear. Admissions committees are consistently impressed with younger applicants' level of innovation, creativity, enthusiasm, and pure intellectual horsepower. Additionally, younger applicants will often take the academic aspects of business school more seriously than their older counterparts because they're coming directly from academia. Therefore, a higher-than-average GPA and GMAT score are the minimum price of admission for you.

The challenge is also clear: You must emphasize your maturity, leadership, and teamwork dimensions to the hilt. For the most part, you'll know whether you can demonstrate your capabilities in these areas just by flipping through essay questions. If you struggle to come up with experiences to utilize in response to these questions, chances are, you're not yet ready to attend b-school. If you can recall applicable experiences, then your objective should be to discuss them in a way that shows you are multi-dimensional, take initiative, and have great interpersonal skills. These experiences could be related to an entrepreneurial venture that you started, an internship, a study abroad program, an academic achievement, a community service project, a student government position, or a club activity.

You must also be able to demonstrate career focus. The last thing an admissions committee wants to see are staid, unthoughtful career objectives from a profile that it anticipates will produce dynamic, high-impact results. Admissions officers want to know that their young students will one day rock the world, or at least shake it a little bit. More than any other profile, you cannot afford to discuss your career objectives vaguely or without passion. You need to be clear about what skills you will gain from business school and how those skills will translate into a post-business school career. It's just as important that you find a way to emphasize why right now is the perfect time for you to enter b-school as opposed to some time in the future. An example would be an idea that you have for an entrepreneurial venture that requires you to gain the skills provided by the target school and an urgency that requires you to get started immediately on the development of a business model.

In a perfect world, your application would contain an assortment of experiences across the four dimensions. You want to push the admissions committee to the point that it has no reason to ding you other than the fact that you're younger than most applicants. At that point, your propensity to accomplish great things will outweigh what will suddenly appear to be a superficial statistic.

The B-school Classroom: A Diversity of Backgrounds

The sights and sounds of the business school classroom 50 years ago were much different than what they are today. What was once a homogeneous student body in terms of professional experience, age, ethnicity, gender, and career goals, is now much more heterogeneous across every dimension. Today, the legacy of a homogeneous classroom still serves as a deterrent for many potential applicants who imagine that the b-school experience consists of ex-consultants and investment bankers proselytizing the benefits of capitalism. This urban legend is decidedly false.

While consultants and bankers tend to make up a significant portion of an incoming class, they generally represent less than 50 percent of the students. Additionally, the b-school classroom represents a multitude of perspectives from a variety of countries (for U.S. b-schools, international students generally represent 25–40 percent of the class).

The following figures display a typical b-school class distribution of undergraduate majors and professional experience:

Figure 1: Undergraduate majors of students at a typical business school

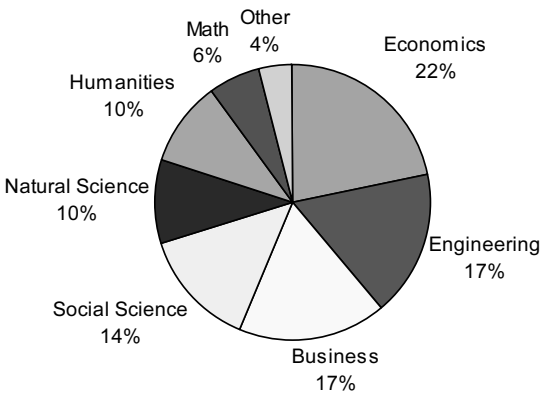
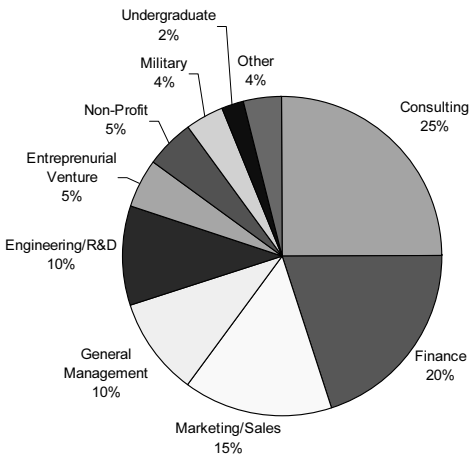


Figure 2: Career backgrounds of students at a typical business school



Not surprisingly, in order to maintain or increase heterogeneity, business schools are actively encouraging a diversity of backgrounds in the classroom. Students acknowledge that a variety of perspectives helps to create a dynamic learning environment in which duplication of opinions is rare. For an example of background variety, consider Omari's study group during b-school:

- ☐ A New Zealand physician.
- ☐ A Pakistani economic development analyst.
- ☐ A U.S. military intelligence officer.
- ☐ A Brazilian investment bank associate.
- ☐ A U.S. middle school teacher who taught in Nepal for two years.

So how can these insights help you? First, if you're considering business school and have a non-traditional background, don't buy into the myth of homogeneity. If you have something to add to a school's learning environment, then there is a spot for you. Secondly, you should take some time to reflect on how you can differentiate yourself based on your background and your career goals. Fortunately for you, that's what this book is all about. Finally, once you get to b-school, don't be afraid to share your unique experiences with your classmates. You'll be admitted largely because of your interesting background, so make sure to help those around you benefit from what you've learned along the way.

FAQs

What if the nature of my job makes it difficult for me to draw upon any useful leadership or teamwork examples?

This is a common complaint from people coming from a number of careers. If you feel like you can't come up with any pertinent examples from your experience, try broadening your definitions of leadership and teamwork. You may not have led a group to achieve a major breakthrough, but maybe you helped a colleague develop a skill that he needed in order to perform his job, even though you received no credit for it. This is a more subtle example of leadership, but one that business schools will still appreciate. Similarly, don't think of teamwork as just instances of you sitting in close quarters with a few of your peers, working all night to solve an impossible problem. A good teamwork example could be much broader, such as how you went out of your way to help someone in another department tackle a problem. Think about every person or group with which you've interacted, and consider using instances where you made a difference in helping someone else succeed.

If in my previous job I had a high-flying title, and now I'm applying to business school, won't that look weird?

It will definitely raise some eyebrows. This problem has become more common since the end of the dot-com boom, with some former vice presidents now explaining why they aspire to become junior consultants. If your high-level position came because you were a founding member of a business, then in admissions officers' eyes you are an entrepreneur. This is good, although like all other entrepreneurs, you will need to

present a convincing argument for why you want to go back to school now. Also, whether or not your business was a success, keep your application story focused on you. You will ideally have a good number of stories to tell about building a team or a product from scratch, so use them. Focus on your achievements and tie them together with where you want to go—and how business school will help you get there.

How much does my employer's brand name matter when applying to business school?

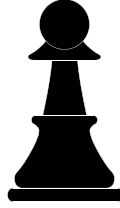
Having a well-known brand on your resume certainly helps, and business schools do tend to value two years' of experience at McKinsey more than they do experience at an unknown consulting firm. But our advice regarding your undergraduate school's reputation applies here, too. If you come from a relatively unknown organization, spend enough time explaining what the company does, but then move on. You don't need to impress admissions officers with your company's five-year compound annual growth rate. Then, spend the vast majority of your time explaining what *you* did at the company, because that's what admissions officers really care about. Similarly, if you do come from a well-known company, don't plan on coasting on the company's reputation. In fact, if the company is known as a mill that turns out business school students, you will need to work hard to set yourself apart from the pack by selling your unique contributions. Two years "on the beach" at McKinsey isn't going to get you in anywhere, so focus on what you did that makes you different.

I've done something really unique. Do you think that will get me into business school?

The short answer is, "Not by itself." The fact that you did something unique, whether it was professional or personal, will certainly help in setting you apart from the crowd. But that alone will definitely not get you in. Think hard about what your unique achievement says about you, and how it fits into your overall application theme. Spending two years in South America helping locals build a farm is a great story, but it doesn't help you much if you can't relate it to the rest of your story. Also, just like every other experience that you draw upon, simply saying that you were involved in something is not enough. You need to show how you specifically contributed. Finally, a string of interesting experiences can actually hurt you if it is hard for admissions officers to make the connections between them. It is up to you to present your experiences in a way that makes sense to someone getting to know you through admissions essays or an interview.

4

UNDERSTANDING THE APPLICATION COMPONENTS



The Process

Now that you have a better understanding of your strengths and weaknesses, and are prepared to differentiate yourself according to your profile, it's time to examine the components of the business school application. So, what should you expect? You should expect to spend an average of 30–50 hours on each application that you complete. Yes, your fourth application may take less time than your first, but be prepared to spend dozens of hours on each application, no matter how many you complete. You should also expect the application process to occupy your life like an attention-starved newborn. Along those lines, don't be surprised if you suffer from a form of “postpartum depression” once the process is completed. If you follow some basic guidelines, however, you can save yourself some frustration and a lot of time.

The Tools

The Internet has drastically changed the way in which business school applications are completed. Imagine calling admissions departments to request applications, filling in data sheets by hand, or agonizing over essays while sitting behind a typewriter. Today, some schools won't even accept paper applications. Thanks to the Internet revolution, you are now faced with two main online options:

- ❑ **PrincetonReview.com**—In 2001, The Princeton Review purchased the online application services provider, Embark.com. Currently, a large number of business schools use PrincetonReview.com as a portal through which applicants may access their applications. Schools that use this service include: Stanford, Kellogg, Michigan, and Stern. The service provides useful functionality such as:
 - A profile form that retains the data common to all of your applications and automatically enters it into your applications for you.

- Reminder messages for upcoming application deadlines.
- A simple uploading process that accepts your essays in almost any electronic format and translates them into PDF format.
- **ApplyYourself.com**—This service powers online applications from such schools as Harvard, Fuqua, and Tuck. The main difference between The Princeton Review and Apply Yourself is that Apply Yourself develops online applications that are tailored for each business school. When you work on an Apply Yourself application, it will appear as though it's the school's own creation. Because Apply Yourself creates school-specific applications, you will see noticeable differences between them. Unfortunately, this means that there is no common data-sharing functionality across Apply Yourself applications.

Some schools, such as Wharton, have created their own online applications. For the most part, these applications reflect Princeton Review's basic functionality, but you'll run into some that fall short. More schools are beginning to develop their own online applications to avoid the fees they incur through the other two options. Fortunately, each new year seems to bring measurable improvements in these options.

Many schools now also accept letters of recommendation via the Internet. This can be a real time-saver, but make sure that your recommenders are at least somewhat Internet savvy before leaving them to their own devices. Also, even though two schools may use the same application service provider, each one may have slightly different rules about how to handle components such as recommendations. Some will accept online recommendations, while others may still prefer paper.

For some schools, you will have more than one online option. In that case we suggest going with PrincetonReview.com, particularly if you have other applications in process with them. That way you will hopefully save yourself from reentering a lot of redundant information across applications. In either case, online applications are much more efficient than their paper counterparts. The time you will save, the more reliable electronic "paper trail" that you will have in case something gets lost, and the ability to more easily catch and correct errors all make online applications the way to go.

The Components

Business schools essentially all use the same framework in putting their applications together. These similarities allow you to approach each application in a similar manner. Still, don't fall into the trap of thinking that each school is looking for the same type of content. Differences in application strategy by business school are highlighted in Chapter 5.

In general, every business school will request the following information in its application:

- Data sheets (for your academic, professional, and personal information).
- Transcript.

- ☐ GMAT score.
- ☐ TOEFL score (for international applicants only).
- ☐ Interview.
- ☐ Essays.
- ☐ Recommendations.
- ☐ Resume.

The rest of the chapter will cover each of the application components in depth and provide you with strategies that you should integrate into your MBA game plan.

Data Sheets

Data sheets are pretty consistent from one application to the next. Each application's data sheets will typically ask for:

- ☐ Contact information.
- ☐ Basic biographical information.
- ☐ Education background.
- ☐ Employment history.
- ☐ Extracurricular activities.
- ☐ Awards.
- ☐ Achievements.

The bad news is that this component is often more time consuming than you would think. One reason is that each school usually asks for something slightly different. For example, one school may ask for only one sentence to describe each job you have held, while another may ask for a few bullet points, and yet another will ask for a paragraph of up to 150 words. Also, the “enter once, use over and over” features of sites such as PrincetonReview.com won't always perfectly transport your data from one application to the next. So be ready to devote some manual labor to writing up your background for each application.

The good news is that your work in Chapter 2 will almost directly translate to this section. The grid that you create will give you the opportunity to spell out everything that you have done, making it easy to pluck activities and enter them where needed. Also, the grid will help you think about what dimensions each activity promotes, which is important as you tailor your application for each school. For the most part, the information that you provide in the data sheets for each application will be the same. Even in this apparently dry section, it is important to maintain your focus on demonstrating fit and uniqueness. As tempting as it will be to simply copy and paste, don't pass up an easy opportunity to set yourself apart.

Data sheets often have very short word limits. In many online systems, you simply won't be allowed to go over the limit. Do yourself a huge favor and obey the limits given. Remember that your application will likely be read by a weary-eyed admissions officer who has to work his way through a shoulder-high stack of applications. Even

though you will almost inevitably feel that you have more to say than what the application allows, be considerate and keep it concise. Your application reader will appreciate it.

One final tip: Under contact information, make sure to list your cell phone number (if you have one) in addition to your work phone number as the main point of contact. Chances are that the good news will be communicated over the phone, and you won't want to be at work wondering if the phone is ringing at home.

Transcript

Naturally, there is not much that you can do about your undergraduate grades assuming that you are already out of college. Still, there are a couple of things you should know regarding transcripts and how they affect your application.

First, on a logistical note, give yourself plenty of time to receive your transcript(s) from your school(s). It can take anywhere from one week to a month to get a transcript back from a school (some offer rush processing), and you usually need to have a transcript sent back to you in order to be able to send it off to your target business school. Start sending out requests as far in advance as possible. Also, it's fine to send multiple transcript requests to a school at one time, but make sure that you are clear about the directions for each b-school. Some business schools require your college's registrar to not only sign a transcript but also to fill out a form, while others ask for course descriptions to accompany a transcript. You can reduce the chance of error on your college's end by giving them enough time and letting them know exactly what to do for each MBA application.

Now, on to the contents of your transcript. Admissions committees are looking for evidence that you challenged yourself in a wide variety of academic areas (especially in quantitative ones) and came away with at least a 3.0 GPA, preferably higher. Of course, if your undergraduate transcript is stellar, then most of your work is already done. Just make sure to highlight relevant coursework and emphasize your success in order to bring out your innovation dimension, as outlined in Chapter 2. If you can show that you were a dedicated, successful student in college, then it will be easy for admissions personnel to imagine you succeeding in their classrooms.

If your transcript isn't perfect, that's okay. You can usually make up for any apparent deficiencies in other ways. Review the transcript weaknesses section in Chapter 2 for tips on how to address poor grades. In general, poor grades can be addressed with a high GMAT, additional coursework (especially in quantitative areas), and perhaps an additional essay explaining your situation. We'll discuss appropriate usage of the additional essay in the essay section on page 80.

GMAT

There is probably no other aspect of the business school application process that strikes more fear into the hearts of applicants than the GMAT. For most, it is the first step toward applying and the key variable in determining which schools are "accessible." Pressure to perform well on the examination has increased as mean scores have

spiked drastically over the last 10 years. While we continue to emphasize the fact that the GMAT score is only one component of the application and should not be overly stressed, it certainly is a key factor in determining your success in applying. It is often said that a great GMAT score alone will never get you into a top business school, but a poor one can most certainly keep you out. We will take a look at the exam and then provide you with advice to help ensure that you don't fall into the latter category.

GMAT background

Graduate business school programs use the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) to help evaluate applicants' analytical writing, mathematical, and verbal abilities. Sponsored by the Graduate Management Admission Council (GMAC), the GMAT is developed, maintained, and administered by the Education Testing Service (ETS). In addition to sponsoring the GMAT, GMAC serves in its role as a nonprofit education association by disseminating information on graduate business education. In looking to augment your knowledge about the GMAT and graduate business school in general, check out GMAC's Website at www.mba.com. The Website provides several of the resources that are covered in the "Ace the GMAT" section, in addition to sample problems and information on signing up for the GMAT.

The GMAT and your transcript(s) will be the major criteria used in assessing your academic ability. B-schools evaluate your GMAT score, in addition to your GPA, because it reflects applicants' capabilities in a standardized manner. GPA does not provide the same level of standardization given the large differences across college curricula. Thus, admissions officers use the GMAT as a way to compare "apples to apples" when evaluating candidates' academic aptitude.

The following table displays the format and the content of the GMAT.

Figure 3: Format and content of the GMAT

	Questions	Timing
Analytical Writing Assessment		
Analysis of an Issue	1	30 Min.
Analysis of an Argument	1	30 Min.
Optional Break	-	5 Min.
Quantitative	37	75 Min.
Problem Solving		
Data Sufficiency		
Optional Break	-	5 Min.
Verbal	41	75 Min.
Reading Comprehension		
Critical Reasoning		
Sentence Correction		
Total Time: 3 Hours 40 Minutes		
Score Range: 200–800		

Analytical writing assessment section

Whenever you hear people tossing around GMAT scores, chances are they are not referring to the Analytical Writing Assessment (AWA). In general, schools barely breathe a word about it and many applicants don't even take the time to prepare for it. Nonetheless, you can't get through the exam without first getting through this often-neglected section.

The purpose of the AWA is to test your ability to present a coherent argument and to analyze an underdeveloped one. The section requires you to complete two 30-minute essays, which are divided into two categories: Analysis of an Issue, and Analysis of an Argument.

Analysis of an issue

This section begins with a statement and then asks you to analyze the issue represented by the statement and develop a short essay that takes a position on the issue. You will be evaluated based on your ability to:

- ☐ Dissect the issue and articulate/defend your position on it.
- ☐ Introduce relevant examples and facts.
- ☐ Write an essay that flows well organizationally and meets the standards of grammatically correct English.

Analysis of an argument

This section is almost identical to Analysis of an Issue, but instead of an issue you will be presented with an argument. After reading the argument, which is generally only a few sentences in length, you are asked to write an essay that evaluates the line of reasoning behind the argument, notes the explicit/implicit assumptions, provides ways in which the argument is weak, and cites evidence that would make the argument more compelling. You will be evaluated based on your ability to:

- ☐ Dissect the argument and articulate your analysis of its “rationality.”
- ☐ Introduce evidence that could weaken and strengthen the argument.
- ☐ Write an essay that flows well organizationally and meets the standards of grammatically correct English.

Note that in both essays you will be evaluated on your ability to construct and dissect arguments, and not on what arguments you actually make. So, don't worry about picking the “right” side of an issue. Rather, pick a side of the issue that you can argue for most strongly, lay out your reasons in a clear and logical manner, and then move on. Also, no matter what position you take, keep in mind what facts could undermine your position, and demonstrate—at least in a sentence or two—that you have considered these possible weaknesses in your argument.

Quantitative section

The good news about the quantitative section of the GMAT is that it does not test advanced mathematical principles, such as multivariate calculus, differential equations,

or multiple regression. The bad news is that the basic mathematical skills that the test does include (arithmetic, algebra, geometry, percentages, fractions, elementary statistics, combinations, and permutations) can appear to be quite complex if you are lacking a quantitative background.

During this section of the exam you will face 37 questions, which will be of two types: Problem Solving and Data Sufficiency.

Problem Solving

Problem Solving questions are generally straightforward in nature, to the extent that you are presented with a mathematical puzzle and are asked to provide an answer. The questions will be very similar to questions that many of us faced on the SAT and ACT. While you most certainly need to spend time bulking up your knowledge of the quantitative concepts tested, very little additional time will need to be spent on understanding how these question types work.

Data Sufficiency

Data Sufficiency questions, on the other hand, are a different story. Contrary to popular belief that these types of questions were devised by a sadist, they are meant to test your ability to determine when there is enough information available to solve a problem. The automatic temptation is to try and actually solve these problems when all that is required is for you to note whether there is sufficient data to solve them.

The problems are comprised of a question and two pieces of information, written as statements and labeled (1) and (2). Your task is to decide whether the statements provide enough information to allow you to solve the stated question. This produces an interesting dynamic in that all answers for this question type are the same. All Data Sufficiency responses look like the following:

- A. Statement (1) **ALONE** is sufficient, but statement (2) alone is not sufficient to answer the question asked.
- B. Statement (2) **ALONE** is sufficient, but statement (1) alone is not sufficient to answer the question asked.
- C. **BOTH** statements (1) and (2) **TOGETHER** are sufficient to answer the question asked, but **NEITHER** statement **ALONE** is sufficient to answer the question asked.
- D. **EACH** statement **ALONE** is sufficient to answer the question asked.
- E. Statements (1) and (2) **TOGETHER** are **NOT** sufficient.

If this sounds at all confusing, don't worry, because it takes awhile to get used to this type of question. With practice, though you will learn to like Data Sufficiency questions...or at least hate them a little less.

Verbal section

The Verbal section is the last hurdle of the exam and is composed of 41 questions. By this point in the exam your eyes are blurry from staring at the screen for the last two hours, but it is important to focus because of the large amount of reading and analysis

required by this section. In general, the section tests your ability to analyze and draw conclusions about written prose, identify and correct grammatical errors in English phrases, and assess arguments. The section is segmented into three types of questions: Reading Comprehension, Sentence Correction, and Critical Reasoning.

Reading Comprehension

This is another question type that will be familiar to those who have taken the SAT and ACT exams. The problems consist of passages, which can be as long as 350 words, and sets of questions that test your understanding of the passages. Passages are generally focused on natural sciences, politics/economics, and business topics. You can expect to see three to four such passages on an exam.

Sentence Correction

Sentence Correction questions present a statement or a phrase that is to be evaluated on its grammatical and stylistic elements. Part or all of the statement/phrase will be underlined, demarking the portion that you are to assess. You will have the option of selecting from four alternative phrases that would replace the underlined portion or to select the original as the correct phrase. Note that the first answer (answer A) will always be the underlined phrase included in the original statement/ phrase.

When selecting the correct answer, you are to evaluate the possibilities based on the requirements of standard written English. In particular, you should consider grammar, sentence structure, redundancy, word selection, and effectiveness.

Critical reasoning

Critical Reasoning questions are similar to the Analysis of an Argument portion of the AWA section in that you will be tested on your ability to evaluate arguments. Naturally, the major difference between the two is that after you are presented with the Critical Reasoning argument, you must select a multiple-choice response to a question regarding that argument. Specifically, you will be asked questions regarding the arguments' conclusions, assumptions, structure, rationale, and factors that could strengthen/weaken the argument.

The CAT

The Quantitative and Verbal sections of the GMAT both consist of multiple-choice questions that are presented as a Computer Adaptive Test (CAT). The CAT is designed to dynamically produce exam questions based on your performance on previous questions. These questions, which range in difficulty from low to high, are pulled from a question bank. The result is a unique exam for every test-taker. The CAT begins by providing a question of moderate difficulty. About half of the test-takers are expected to get the question correct and half are expected to get it wrong. If you get the question correct, then your score increases and a more difficult question is supplied. If you get the question wrong, then your score goes down and an easier question is supplied. By the end of the test, the CAT finds your score based on the number of correct answers given to questions at different levels of difficulty. As one might imagine, there is a

complex algorithm underlying this process. The algorithm decides the appropriate level of difficulty for your next question, the value of that question, and eventually your score. Because your questions are generated based on previous responses, you may not skip a question and return to it, as was possible on the paper GMAT.

Your GMAT score

So what's the bottom line? The bottom line will be revealed through four scores: Total, Quantitative, Verbal, and Analytical Writing Assessment. The first three scores will be provided to you immediately after you complete the exam. Your AWA score will be sent to you a few weeks later. Here are the details on each score component.

Total score

The Total score is the one that you'll hear thrown around the most. Total scores range from 200 to 800, with students at top schools averaging around 690. In addition to the score itself, schools will take a look at the percentile in which your score falls. The percentiles change on a year-to-year basis as scores go up, but the following table should give you an idea of how competitive different scores are.

Figure 4: Total scores and percentiles of examinees tested from January 1999 through December 2001

Total Score	Percentage Below
750–800	99%
740	98%
720	98%
700	96%
680	90%
660	87%
640	87%
620	81%
600	70%
580	64%
560	57%
540	50%
520	44%
500	37%

Quantitative score

Quantitative scores are placed on a different scale than Total scores and range from 0 to 60. Given the quantitative rigor of business school curricula, most programs will place more of an emphasis on this score than Verbal, especially if you are lacking a quantitative background. The following table provides information on Quantitative scores and their corresponding percentiles.

Figure 5: Quantitative scores and percentiles of examinees tested from January 1999 through December 2001

Total Score	Percentage Below
51–60	99%
50	96%
48	87%
46	80%
44	74%
42	67%
40	62%
38	55%
36	48%
34	41%
32	35%
30	29%

Verbal score

Verbal scores are scaled in the same fashion as Quantitative scores. They, however, are not comparable, because examinee performance on each part of the test differs greatly. Obtaining a score of 40 on the Verbal section is much better than obtaining a score of 40 on the Quantitative section. These differences can be seen by comparing the Verbal score in Figure 6 to the Quantitative score table in Figure 5.

Figure 6: Verbal scores and percentiles of examinees tested from January 1999 through December 2001

Total Score	Percentage Below
45–60	99%
44	97%
42	96%
40	90%
38	85%
36	81%
34	72%
32	67%
30	59%
28	51%
26	43%
24	35%

Analytical writing assessment score

Chances are that no one will ever ask you about your AWA score, because of business schools' heavy dependence on your responses to their own essays. Still, you should be familiar with how this portion of the exam is graded, because it is a criterion that schools consider (albeit to only a small extent). Your AWA score is an average of the scores you receive on the Analysis of an Issue and Analysis of an Argument portions, which are themselves averages of two independent scores. The result is a score that ranges from 0 to 6 in half-point increments, as opposed to one-point increments for the Quantitative/Verbal scores and 10-point increments for the Total score. The following table shows how AWA scores and their percentiles match up.

Figure 7: AWA scores and percentiles of examinees tested from January 1999 through December 2001

Total Score	Percentage Below
6.0	97%
5.5	90%
5.0	79%
4.5	62%
4.0	42%
3.5	24%
3.0	11%
2.5	5%
2.0	2%

Analyzing your score

While it would be nice to score above or at the mean of your target schools, you shouldn't continuously take the exam until you hit that mark. In addition to mean scores, you should consider the 80 percent range of the schools. As mentioned in Chapter 2, it will be very difficult to get into your target schools if your score falls below that range. Indeed, this should be a consideration in selecting your target schools. When you take a look at the GMAT ranges of top schools, you'll notice that they can be divided into three categories: equal to or above 650, below 610 and in between 650 and 610. The table in Figure 8 displays these groupings, sorted by the low-end of the range.

Figure 8: Top business schools' 80% GMAT range

Business School	Middle 80% GMAT Range
Group 1	
Stanford University	675–765*
Columbia Business School	670–750
Harvard Business School	670–755*
INSEAD	660–730
Northwestern University (Kellogg)	660–750
University of Pennsylvania (Wharton)	660–760
MIT (Sloan)	650–760
NYU (Stern)	650–750
University of California at Berkley (Haas)	650–760
UCLA (Andersen)	650–750
Group 2	
Dartmouth College (Tuck)	640–760
Duke University (Fuqua)	640–760
London Business School	640–740
University of North Carolina (Kenan-Flagler)	640–710
USC (Marshall)	640–720
University of Texas	640–710
Yale School of Management	640–740
University of Michigan Business School	630–730
University of Virginia (Darden)	620–740
Group 3	
Carnegie Mellon University (GSIA)	610–730
Emory University (Goizueta)	610–740
University of Chicago	610–750
University of Maryland (Smith)	610–710
Cornell University (Johnson)	600–730
University of Western Ontario (Ivey)	600–720
Purdue University (Krannert)	590–730
University of Rochester (Simon)	590–720
Vanderbilt University (Owen)	588–710
Indiana University (Kelley)	580–710
Michigan State University (Broad)	570–710

* Estimates

Note that these groupings are not meant to serve as some sort of ranking. They are not at all reflective of school quality and are merely one resource that you can use in deciding on your target schools.

Another consideration is your Quantitative/Verbal score split. You'll often hear that top schools look for students who have scored in the 80th percentile on both sections of the exam. While this isn't specifically true, you should be cognizant of your background strengths, your score split, and the emphases of your target programs. Programs that are more quantitatively rigorous will naturally place more of an emphasis on your quantitative abilities. So, if your quantitative score is relatively low, then you

will have to show your ability to succeed in that program through other parts of your application.

Submitting your scores

The score submission process occurs immediately after you complete the exam. As part of the \$200 test-taking fee, you may submit your scores to up to five schools. Because you have to choose which schools you want to receive the scores before you see the results, you should make an initial selection of target schools before the exam. Naturally, that list can, and, in many cases should, be revised after taking the exam. Once you submit your exam scores, you usually won't have to send any additional GMAT information to the selected schools, other than maybe entering your scores into the schools' application forms. The score report that the selected schools receive will include scores from your three most recent GMAT exams. GMAC holds scores for 20 years, but most schools only accept scores that are less than 5 years old.

After the exam, you can send score reports to additional schools for a \$25 per-school charge. The test-taking fee does not cover any post-exam score submissions even if you don't select any schools on exam day.

How to Ace the GMAT

Just like your approach to applications, you should have a strategy in approaching the GMAT that is well thought-out and has some contingencies. Obtaining a good score will help give you confidence as you begin to attack other aspects of the application. This section provides advice on how to tackle the exam and achieve results that broaden your school opportunities rather than limit them.

Start early

There is nothing worse than having to complete applications while studying for the GMAT. Writing essays, managing recommenders, and completing data sheets are time consuming enough, without the requisite hours of GMAT preparation. We suggest that you begin your preparation course or independent studying at least six months before you plan on starting your applications. This will give you ample time to retake the examination if need be. Trust us on this: The faster it's over, the happier you will be.

Once you have your strategy in place, take the next step and sign up for the exam. A lot of applicants don't sign up and lose their focus on studying as a result. If you are like most people, having an actual "D-day" set in stone will help intensify your focus and give you the motivation you need to get ready for the exam.

Know your strengths and weaknesses

You've taken standardized tests before and are familiar with your performance. Additionally, you know your strengths in terms of quantitative skills and verbal dexterity. Finally, you know whether you need a highly structured environment and rigid schedule in order to study effectively or whether you can be successful studying according to your own schedule. Given these considerations, come up with a plan that targets your

weaknesses so that you can maximize your performance on exam day. If you historically perform poorly on standardized tests and have trouble calculating tips at restaurants, it probably isn't a good idea to go into the exam after only a couple weeks of preparation.

Despite what you might hear, it is definitely possible to improve your score through concentrated training, so don't get discouraged if you fall into the "can't calculate tips" category. In general, we will focus our GMAT advice to the average to poor test-taker, so make adjustments accordingly if you can pull a 700 in your sleep.

Make a decision on whether to take a prep course

Test preparation companies have become very popular with standardized test-takers across a variety of exams. Despite the cost, which ranges from \$1,000 to \$1,500, thousands of test-takers flock to test preparation companies each year. It's no different with the GMAT. You should consider a GMAT preparation course if:

- ❑ **You are a chronically poor standardized test-taker.** Some people are gifted with the natural ability to perform well on standardized exams and don't need any assistance. For the rest of us, the very idea of taking such an exam is disheartening. Enrolling in a GMAT preparation course can be a great way to build confidence and to get a handle on the challenges of the GMAT.
- ❑ **You need a structured approach.** A big plus of GMAT preparation courses is the fact that they place you on a standard schedule. It can be too easy to fall off the wagon in terms of studying, and taking a course can be a great way to ensure that you stay focused on preparation. Indeed, staying focused is probably the most important part of preparation.
- ❑ **You would like to maximize your access to resources.** Depending on which GMAT preparation course you select, you will gain access to a number of resources, including books, strategies, sample exams, and of course, teachers.

As the last bullet suggests, all GMAT preparation courses are not created equal. Different courses provide different offerings in terms of teacher training, sample examinations, class size, and general preparation support. Here are the major players:

- ❑ **Kaplan:** Kaplan (www.kaplan.com) is the oldest player in the test-preparation market. In addition to the GMAT, it provides courses for all of the major standardized exams (SAT, ACT, GRE, MCAT, LSAT, etc.). As the first major entrant in the market, Kaplan has made a name for itself through its notoriously grueling exams. In terms of the GMAT, you can expect that your actual GMAT score will greatly exceed the scores you receive on Kaplan exams.
- ❑ **The Princeton Review:** The Princeton Review (www.princetonreview.com) made a dent in Kaplan's market share by offering smaller classes. Princeton Review also offers courses for each of the major standardized exams and, as mentioned earlier in the chapter, has become an application service provider. Similar to Kaplan, Princeton Review practice exams fall short in

terms of replicating the actual GMAT exam, as some of the sections are structured differently than those featured on the GMAT.

- ❑ **Veritas:** Veritas (www.veritasprep.com) is the latest incarnation of GMAT preparation courses. Founded by two business school graduates, Veritas focuses strictly on GMAT preparation and has rapidly garnered a large following. Our suggestion is that applicants interested in taking a GMAT preparation course consider Veritas, given its instructors' credentials (all instructors scored in the 99th percentile on the GMAT), extensive in-class training (42 hours), and online and live instructor phone support. Additionally, the Veritas-created exam questions closely replicate those you will see on an actual GMAT. The company currently offers four diagnostic tests and eight CATs that are licensed from ETS and ARCO.

Be aware that taking a prep course does not lift the burden of preparation from your shoulders. You are not paying for a higher GMAT score, you're paying for the resources and training that help you earn a higher score. In order to get the most out of your course, you will need to do at least as much work outside of the classroom as in it. Keep up with the course's brisk pace, and the payoff can be worth the time and money.

Should you decide to pass on taking a GMAT preparation course or decide to take on additional study outside of your GMAT preparation course (which many applicants decide to do), here are some suggestions that successful applicants have found to be helpful.

Become familiar with exam strategy

One of the benefits of taking a GMAT preparation course is the strategies and exam shortcuts that are discussed. The courses do a good job of describing how you should approach the exam. To learn about such strategies and just to get familiar with the exam in general, we suggest taking a look at *Cracking the GMAT* by The Princeton Review. This book, which includes sample exams, is not intimidating and provides solid strategic advice that you will be able to readily apply. We have heard many complaints, however, in regard to the practice exams' ability to replicate a true GMAT in addition to the relative easiness of the questions. We therefore recommend this book as a starter, only to be used to "get your feet wet."

Practice on real GMAT questions

There is no substitute for practicing on actual GMAT questions. There is a certain logic that underlies the questions and their solutions that is uncovered by working on the questions over and over again. As such, we highly recommend *The Official Guide for GMAT Review*, published by the infamous GMAC/ETS coalition. The guide is comprehensive in that it provides more than 1,400 actual GMAT questions, which are accompanied by explanations of the answers. The guide also includes the entire bank of AWA questions, so you could theoretically prepare in advance for every AWA question that it is possible to receive on the day of the exam. While we definitely don't recommend that approach, reviewing a few of the AWA questions to get a feel for the essay topics is helpful.

The other integral part of your preparation should be POWERPREP test preparation software. POWERPREP can be downloaded for free from www.mba.com and allows users to take two actual GMAT exams. Placing yourself under actual exam conditions can be extremely beneficial as you get a feel for timing, how the algorithm works, and the overall length of the exam. Unfortunately, POWERPREP questions are drawn from the same bank as questions in *The Official Guide for GMAT Review* were drawn, so you will see overlap. Nonetheless, applicants continuously state that these two resources were invaluable in their GMAT preparation.

One way you can approach the studying process is by labeling the various types of questions as you take them. For example, problem solving problems can be labeled basic algebra, coordinate geometry, fraction, probability, etc. In addition to providing them with a label, give them a difficulty ranking such as hard, moderate, or easy. By assigning labels and difficulty levels to questions, you can track your performance on different problem types and then identify the areas in which you are the weakest. Ideally, after going through enough questions, you will get to the point where you immediately recognize a question's type as soon as you see it, and know how you will approach it. It may seem like the GMAT has an infinite variety of questions, but after enough practice, you will start to see the same types of questions again and again.

Review advanced questions and shore up your weaknesses

One common complaint about the resources offered by GMAC/ETS is that the questions provided are relatively easy as compared to the hardest parts of the GMAT. These complaints are especially directed at the quantitative questions contained in *The Official Guide for GMAT Review*. For additional assistance, take a look at the *GRE/GMAT Math Review*, published by Arco, and *GMAT 800*, published by Kaplan. You can use these guides as supplements to strengthen the areas in which you are the weakest. These guides, combined with the resources provided by GMAC/ETS, should give you ample material from which to prepare. In fact, many applicants will not need all of these resources to attain their target score. Your challenge is to understand the best preparation strategy for yourself, based on your needs, and utilize these materials and courses accordingly.

Don't get discouraged

It can be easy to get discouraged after reading your 15th science-based reading comprehension passage and getting all of the questions wrong. It can be even more discouraging to take the GMAT once or twice and not achieve the score for which you are aiming. It is important in those times to target the areas that are bringing your score down and attack them veraciously. Some applicants have found one-on-one GMAT tutoring to be helpful. Our suggestion is to make sure you've gained a strong understanding of how the exam works and are very familiar with the questions before looking for a tutor. Tutors can be extremely expensive (in excess of \$2,000 for 15 hours), so it is in your best interest to learn as much as you can before going down that road.

In general, if you remain dedicated to studying and follow these tips, you should be in great shape on exam day.

Conversation With Chad Troutwine

Chad Troutwine is cofounder of the Veritas GMAT Course, a global GMAT preparation service. Prior to starting Veritas, Chad received his MBA from the Yale School of Management and his J.D. from the University of Missouri. Chad's position within Veritas makes him intimately familiar with the GMAT exam. We had the opportunity to sit down with Chad and get his perspectives on the examination that gives so many applicants sleepless nights.

What exactly is the GMAT supposed to measure?

Business schools seek the best students possible. In an effort to evaluate candidates from a global spectrum of undergraduate institutions, the Graduate Management Admissions Council (GMAC) turned to the Educational Testing Service (ETS) to create an objective measure of the verbal and quantitative abilities of their applicants. While many have roundly criticized the SAT (another ETS-created test) for its racial and socioeconomic biases, the GMAT has remained relatively unscathed for 50 years. Contrary to popular belief, the GMAT has also proven to be a highly accurate predictor of a student's academic success in graduate business school. Still, the GMAT is not a valid proxy for the rest of the application process. Specifically, the GMAT is not particularly helpful in the ultimate task of any admissions committee—assessing an applicant's managerial prowess or leadership potential.

How much of this is innate, and how much can be learned?

Because the GMAT is a test of analytical skill, rather than a subject-based exam, a mythology developed that a test-taker could not dramatically improve her score. Kaplan, and other pioneers in the test preparation industry, exposed the myth—and Veritas has completely shattered it. Applicants who have a history of scoring well on standardized examinations will almost certainly do well on the GMAT. On the other hand, those who do not innately possess those skills can still acquire them. All standardized examinations have patterns. We have completely deconstructed the GMAT and created proven strategies to help our students exploit those archetypes.

What GMAT-related weaknesses do you most commonly see in applicants?

Applicants commonly design flawed preparation strategies. Specifically, we often see industrious students who are convinced that the secret to achieving a high score on the GMAT is simple: Grind through as many practice questions as possible. They are misinformed. The ideal way to prepare for the GMAT is to learn a multifaceted and proven strategy *first*, then perfect that strategy with lots of sample questions. Students who jump right to the second part of the equation typically repeat the same errors, reinforcing their bad habits instead of correcting them.

What are some of the more correctable weaknesses for an average applicant who is preparing for the GMAT? What weaknesses tend to be harder for a typical applicant to correct?

Poor time management is prevalent, but easily corrected. Some students race ahead, leaving valuable minutes unused. Other students move too slowly, sacrificing precious time on early problems and leaving far too little time for later, often more difficult, questions. We offer several practice exams and pacing strategies to help alleviate both weaknesses.

Reading Comprehension takes time to master. Students develop reading skills over a long period of time, particularly non-native English speakers. Other students struggle with esoteric rules of grammar. Still others have rusty (or non-existent) probability skills. The key for any student is to accurately diagnose weak areas and address them during the course of study.

What's a reasonable level of improvement (from an initial diagnostic score to the actual GMAT) that an applicant should shoot for?

Improvement is a function of several different factors, so expectations should vary. If a student starts with a lower score (a 400, for instance), he could reasonably expect a 150–200 point increase. Conversely, if a student starts with a higher score (a 650, for example), she might be thrilled with a 60–100 point increase. A student who has previous exposure to the GMAT will likely begin with a higher diagnostic score, but may not have the same growth potential as her unexposed classmate. Formal preparation should raise expectations, too. According to studies conducted by our biggest competitors, students who prepare on their own suffer with stunted scores (when compared to those who take a full preparation course).

Do you find that applicants who take the test more than once are able to significantly improve their scores?

GMAC statistics indicate that students do not improve much from one test to another. However, we are convinced that many of those repeating students do not take active steps to radically improve their prospects, and their results reflect that apathy. On the other hand, our repeaters are encouraged to adopt Veritas methods before retaking the test. As a result, our students who previously took the GMAT still average a nearly 100 point increase, far above the average for all test-takers.

It seems like top schools' mean GMAT scores keep creeping up. What do you think that's all about?

We have three related theories. First, the pool of test-takers has improved. Raw quantitative scores have surged in the last decade, and the standardization of the GMAT has not kept pace. More students than ever are taking prep courses, so more arrive equipped to score well. Additionally, the number of international applicants has ballooned. According to GMAC, students in several international locales achieve higher average scores than their North American counterparts, particularly on the quantitative section. Tellingly, raw verbal scores have remained relatively flat for the same period. Second, GMAC has verified the predictive ability of the GMAT in several studies with many graduate business schools. Consequently, schools may be relying more and

more on the GMAT, shading their means ever higher. Finally, the scores began to climb steadily after ETS switched the GMAT from a paper-and-pencil format to an exclusively computer-adaptive test in 1997–98. Any test that consistently relies on reusing questions is vulnerable.

We hear a lot of rumors that ETS has increased the number of combination and permutation problems featured on the GMAT. What's your perspective?

We hear the same rumors, and they may well be true. Another plausible theory is that, as quantitative scores continue to rise, more students than ever are receiving difficult questions. “Perm/combo” questions typically come from the pool of very difficult questions, so they may be appearing more frequently because the relative skill of the test-takers is rising. We take no chances in our commitment to provide the best GMAT preparation available. As a service to our students, we devote a significant amount of time to probability questions, particularly perm/combo questions, in our advanced quantitative lessons. Our dynamic instructors teach proven Veritas strategies, and the lesson booklets include hundreds of practice problems to help students hone their skills.

Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)

If the GMAT is the mountain that applicants must conquer before receiving admittance into a b-school program, then the TOEFL is generally considered little more than a speed bump. That's not to say that the TOEFL is wholly insignificant, but an applicant who performs well on the verbal section of the GMAT shouldn't have any problems with the TOEFL.

As the title would suggest, the TOEFL's function is to measure the English proficiency of people whose native language is not English. If your native language is English, you can stop reading this section right now, as you will not be required to take the exam. Many schools will also allow applicants who studied in an English-only curriculum or worked extensively in an English-speaking country to waive the exam. Because b-schools differ on the delineation of who is required to take the TOEFL and who is not, you should check the policies of your target schools.

One of the reasons the TOEFL is not as rigorous as the GMAT is because it is geared toward a wider audience. Indeed, the TOEFL is taken by aspiring students of multiple disciplines at multiple levels, in addition to people applying for scholarships, certifications, and government positions. Like the GMAT, however, the TOEFL has moved to a computer-based exam and is produced by ETS. Although the TOEFL has been offered in a computer format since 1998, applicants still can take the paper-based exam in certain regions. However, unless otherwise stated, we will refer to the computer-based exam.

Format and content

The TOEFL consists of four sections:

- ☐ **Listening:** Tests your ability to comprehend spoken English, as used in North America. You will hear a conversation, lecture, or classroom

discussion and then be asked to answer a question about the conversation’s meaning, implications, or supporting details. The content of this section is different from that of all of the GMAT sections, so you shouldn’t expect GMAT preparation to help you perform well on this part of the TOEFL. This section is similar to the GMAT, however, in that it is computer-adaptive. As such, you will not be able to go back to a question after you select answer.

- ❑ **Structure:** Tests your knowledge of formal English grammar. The section consists of two types of questions: Sentence completion and error identification. Sentence completion questions require you to “fill in the blank” with one of four choices that best completes the sentence. Error identification questions require you to select one of four underlined words or phrases that must be changed in order to make the sentence correct. The Structure section is also computer-adaptive, so you will not be able to go back to a question after responding to it.
- ❑ **Reading:** Tests your ability to comprehend written academic English. You will be asked to read a passage and then answer questions about that passage. Similar to the Listening section, questions focus on the meaning, implications, and details of the passages. Unlike the Listening section, however, the Reading section is not computer-adaptive, so you can go back to previously answered questions.
- ❑ **Writing:** Tests your ability to write in English on an assigned topic. You will be asked to write a standard English essay that expounds on a topic and provides supporting details. This section is not computer-adaptive, as there is only one essay question to which you must respond.

The following is a summary of the TOEFL’s format and content:

Figure 9: Format and content of the computer-based TOEFL

	Questions	Timing	Section Type
Listening	30–49	40–60 min.	Computer –adaptive
Structure	20–25	15–20 min.	Computer –adaptive
Reading	44–55	70–90 min.	Non –adaptive
Writing	1	30 min.	Non –adaptive
Total Time: 2 Hours 35 Minutes–3 Hours 20 Minutes			
Score Range: 0–300			

Scoring

You will receive a separate score for each of the four sections and a total score that represents your performance on the Listening, Structure, and Reading sections. Individual scores for each of these three sections range from 0 to 30, while total scores range from 0 to 300.

When you hear people talking about their “TOEFL score,” they are generally referring to their total 0 to 300 score. So what should you shoot for? B-schools tend to be more explicit in stating what their TOEFL requirements are versus their GMAT requirements. While you should definitely find out what your target schools’ TOEFL requirements are, top schools generally look for scores close to 260. Figure 10 provides the scores and percentiles of recent test-takers. You should also note that there is a separate scoring system for the paper exam. Figure 11 displays a comparison of the two scoring systems.

Figure 10: Scores and percentiles of examinees tested from July 2000 through

Total	% Below	Listening	% Below	Structure	% Below	Total	% Below
300	99%	30	99%	300	99%	300	99%
280	96%	28	95%	280	93%	280	93%
260	84%	26	84%	260	81%	260	81%
240	68%	24	68%	240	63%	240	64%
220	51%	22	53%	220	47%	220	48%
200	36%	20	39%	200	34%	200	34%
180	23%	18	28%	180	24%	180	23%
160	15%	16	20%	160	15%	160	15%
140	8%	14	13%	140	10%	140	9%
120	4%	12	8%	120	6%	120	5%
100	2%	10	5%	100	3%	100	2%
80	1%	8	2%	80	1%	80	1%

June 2001

Computer-based Score	Paper-based Score
287–300	660–677
273–283	640–657
260–270	620–637
250–260	600–617
237–240	580–597
220–233	560–577
207–220	540–557
190–203	520–537
173–187	500–517
157–170	480–497
140–153	460–477

Figure 11: Computer-based and paper-based score comparison

Similar to the AWA portion of the GMAT, the writing section of the TOEFL is scored separately from the rest of the exam. Scores on the writing section range from 0 to 6 and increase in half-point increments. Most schools don’t have a required score for the writing section like they might for the total score. Nonetheless, you should still spend some time practicing a few essays, so that you feel comfortable with the section. Figure 12 provides the scores and percentiles of recent test-takers on the writing section. Most successful applicants score above 4.0.

Figure 12: Writing scores and percentiles of examinees tested from July 2000 through June 2001

Total	% Below
6.0	98%
5.5	92%
5.0	83%
4.5	70%
4.0	50%
3.5	29%
3.0	15%
2.5	7%
2.0	3%

TOEFL preparation

Many applicants find it helpful to prepare for the TOEFL prior to preparing for the GMAT, as it is considered to be less difficult. Additionally, preparation for the TOEFL will help you practice for the verbal section of the GMAT.

Because test-takers' familiarity with English varies so greatly, it's difficult to suggest an appropriate amount of preparation time. On average, applicants generally find about two to three months of preparation to be enough. Similar to GMAT preparation, we suggest first gaining an understanding of exam strategy and then practicing on real TOEFL questions. For exam strategy, we suggest *Peterson's TOEFL Success*. This book will provide you with an in-depth overview of the exam and specific tactics for each section. For practice on real TOEFL questions, you should pick up the *TOEFL Preparation Kit*. In addition to this book, ETS offers PowerPrep software for the TOEFL. You can download TOEFL PowerPrep from www.toefl.org. This site contains additional resources in which you might be interested, so check it out when you have a chance.

Performing well on the TOEFL is vital to international applicants' prospects of gaining acceptance to their target schools. By following these simple tips, you should be in great shape to do well on the exam.

Interview

In one sense, your admissions interview will be the fastest part of your entire application process: just 30 to 60 minutes and you're done. Looked at another way, it will be the most stressful part: you need to come out from behind your word processor and face a potential grilling. Neither view is exactly right. The work that you do on your interview will start weeks before it actually happens, as you craft your application. Ideally, by the time you sit down across from your interviewer, your extensive preparation will put you at relative ease. For the most part, your admissions interview will simply be

another way in which you communicate the story that you have already constructed. As long as you have your game plan in place, your interview should only help you strengthen your story.

Why interviews?

Believe it or not, interviews are a relatively new phenomenon in the world of business school admissions. While many of the top programs conduct interviews “by invitation only,” nearly all of them have a stated goal of interviewing all of the applicants whom they eventually admit. Other b-schools make interviews optional, but highly recommend them. Finally, some b-schools outright require interviews for all applicants. No matter what your target schools’ policies are, there is a much greater chance that you will go through this ritual than if you had applied 10 years ago.

Why are interviews becoming a more important part of the admissions process? For one, business schools need more and more mechanisms to separate the great candidates from the good ones, as the admissions process becomes more competitive. What better way to do that than to look an applicant in the eye and ask him why he wants to go to your school? Also, schools have become more and more careful about building strong communities and cohesive student bodies. Because each class is a melting pot of personalities, schools want to personally inspect each one of those personalities before granting admission.

Every school looks for slightly different attributes in its applicants, but you can be sure that the admissions committee will be looking to answer a few key questions about you:

- ☐ Are you the person you say you are in your application?
- ☐ How are your communication skills?
- ☐ Are you someone your classmates would be glad to be around?
- ☐ Are you ready for business school?

The interview is often the best way to get at these answers. The purpose of an interview isn’t to see how well you act under pressure or to try and trick you into revealing something terrible about yourself. Think of it as a way to reinforce what you have already said about yourself in the rest of your application and to help the admissions committee put a face to the name and numbers in your application. Yes, your interviewer may probe around certain weaknesses in your application or resume, but this is your chance to attack those weaknesses head-on and put them to rest.

Types of interviews

There are several different variables that determine exactly what the tone of your interview will be. These variables include: who interviews you, where and how the interview takes place, and how much the interviewer knows about you before your meeting.

Who could interview you:

- ☐ **Admissions officer:** These interviews tend to be the most formal, and the most specific in terms of what the interviewer is looking for. Admissions

personnel will usually have a form from which they work, and will make an effort to cover each area before the interview is over. Beware, though, that if the admissions officer doesn't cover everything in the allotted time and some questions go unanswered, that will be considered your fault. Your main line of defense against this problem is making sure that you don't ramble. Later on we will discuss how you can make sure to cover the most important parts of your story.

- ❑ **Student:** Some schools train their students to conduct interviews. These students will typically work off of the same forms that admissions officers use. While you may hit it off with some students and end up having an informal conversation, many students tend to conduct interviews “by the book” even more so than admissions officers. Schools tend to use the interview feedback they get from students in the same way as the feedback they get from admissions officers. So, you should treat an interview with a student the same as an interview with an admissions officer.
- ❑ **Alumni:** Alumni have a reputation for being a little more laid back in terms of how they conduct an interview. They will also have some guidelines for conducting the interview, but tend to be more willing to let it evolve into a natural conversation. Remember, though, that they are still evaluating you. Even more importantly, if there are certain messages that you want to get across and the interviewer just wants to talk about the Red Sox, know that the onus is still on you to cover those messages. Also, keep in mind that alumni interviews tend to be the least restrictive in terms of time. Many alumni will let an interview stretch on for well over an hour if you are both enjoying the conversation. Finally, be prepared for a little more variability in your experience. While most applicants report having great interviews with alumni, there are more than a couple of horror stories of applicants being traumatized by weird, rude, or even harassing interviewers. These types of stories are rare, but know that experiences with alumni interviewers can be less consistent than with other interviewer types.
- ❑ **Faculty:** While having a faculty member interview you is extremely uncommon, there are some schools (most notably the London Business School) that might have you interview with a professor. These interviews generally feel like a discussion with an admission officer, but tend to be more academic in nature. Therefore, you should go into the discussion having a good understanding of the academic choices you've made in addition to being able to articulate what you want to get out of the curriculum.

Where you could be interviewed:

- ❑ **On campus:** Most interviews with admissions personnel and students take place on campus. The bottom line is that you should try your best to get to campus to do your interview. It might seem minor, especially because many schools make off-campus interviews readily available, but visiting campus goes a long way in showing your interest in the school (especially if you live far away). Expect your on-campus interview to be

conducted in the admissions office, usually in formal attire (although a few schools conduct business casual interviews). While you're on campus, take advantage of the chance to meet with current students, tour the grounds, and sit in on a class.

- ❑ **Off campus:** Off-campus interviews are usually conducted by alumni, although some schools will do “tours” once or twice a year in which they visit major cities and interview a bunch of candidates at a hotel, or conduct interviews at a GMAC MBA Forum (which is like a traveling job fair, but for business schools). You can expect the format of these interviews to be the same as those of interviews conducted on campus. Interviews with alumni can take place anywhere, from coffee shops to restaurants to the alum's own office. We suggest picking a quiet place, but we advise that you try not to do the interview in the alum's office. Even the best-meaning alum can be easily distracted when surrounded by his work. Also, you will probably feel more comfortable in a more “neutral” setting, so avoid the in-office interview if you can. If your alum suggests his office, reply that it might be nice to get out of the office, and be ready with a few alternatives to suggest. Most alumni will respond positively to this.
- ❑ **Phone interviews:** Most schools prefer that you meet in person with an admissions representative. However, there are cases in which geographical, financial, or time constraints don't always allow that to happen. In those cases, your interview might be conducted over the phone. Phone interviews are usually with admissions counselors and follow the same format as other interview types. They are given the same weight as other interview types, but given the opportunity, we advocate trying to make it to campus.

How much your interviewer will know about you:

- ❑ **Resume-based interview:** Most schools' interviews are “blind,” meaning that the interviewer has not seen your application before meeting with you. The most the interviewer will know about you is your resume, and some don't even see this before the interview. In these cases, you can expect a lot of general questions to start things off, such as, “Tell me about yourself,” or “Walk me through your resume.” Because the interviewer knows very little about you in these situations, and you usually have just 30 to 60 minutes to sell yourself, it is critical that you know what messages you want to communicate, and that you hit all of them before time is up.
- ❑ **Application-based interview:** A few schools have their interviewers read through your entire application before the interview. In this case, the interviewer is generally an admissions officer. After reading your application, the interviewer will develop a picture of you in her mind, and will come to the interview prepared with specific questions. Expect some probing of weaknesses and questions around your motivations for moves that you've

made in the past, such as, “Why did you decide to leave Morgan Stanley and go into venture capital?” You can help yourself most by knowing your story cold, anticipating weaknesses, and having reasons for why you’ve done the things that led you to apply to business school. You should also pay special attention to your career goals, because it is almost certain that you will be asked to expand on them.

Most of the preparation that you do for your interview will be the same no matter where you do it and who interviews you. The differences will mainly be nuances, such as how many specific questions the interviewer prepares ahead of time, how long the interview is, and how many questions you are able to ask. Now we’ll dive into specific tips for acing the interview.

Interview preparation

You are the best expert on you. You know why you’ve made the decisions that have led you to this point, what your strengths and weaknesses are, and (hopefully) where you want to go next in your career. The challenge is in figuring out how to best communicate all of this to your interviewer, and in being ready to tell various stories from your past that illustrate your abilities.

The questions you will get in an interview tend to fall into several broad categories: high-level questions about you, questions about why you want to go to business school (and where you want to go after that), and questions about specific experiences in your background. We will look at each of these question types in turn.

High-level questions about you

These are usually the most open-ended questions. An interviewer who asks these questions is giving you a chance to talk about your own history and traits, and to emphasize the parts of your background that are most important to your application story. Questions of this type include:

- ☐ Tell me about yourself.
- ☐ Walk me through your resume.
- ☐ How would your friends/coworkers/supervisor describe you?
- ☐ What are your biggest weaknesses?
- ☐ What are your biggest strengths?

The first two questions are similar, and are often used to start off an interview. If an interviewer asks you to start this way, this is your chance to take control of the interview and explicitly state the two or three core messages that you want to emphasize. Practice is vitally important. Your goal is to develop an “elevator pitch” of approximately three minutes that describes your background, highlights your strengths, and provides a story above and beyond the simple facts on your resume.

The following is a fictitious example of how someone might answer “Tell me about yourself.” The answer to “Walk me through your resume” would be very similar, as you would still be pointing out specific achievements and provide a context for your career path:

Growing up, I was always interested in cars, and I remember helping my dad change the oil in our car when I was as young as 6 years old. By the time I got to high school, I knew that I wanted to become an engineer, so I devoted most of my energy to studying math and science. I went on to attend Ellicot University, where I earned my mechanical engineering degree. I was also very involved in my fraternity, where I was Treasurer, and I am proud to say that I started the Ellicot Racing Club, which has grown to more than 30 members.

After graduating from Ellicot, I pursued my interest in cars by taking a job at Midwest Motor Company. I entered as an Assistant Design Engineer. It was exactly what I dreamed of: I worked on projects that shaped the cars that millions of people drive. In my first year there, I made recommendations for a safer airbag system for Midwest Motor's small passenger cars, which were ultimately implemented. We estimate that at least 500 lives are saved each year thanks to the new system. After my first year, I was promoted to Design Engineer, and I was placed in a team that was charged with redesigning the child safety restraints in Midwest Motor's minivans. It was a tough project because we were given a short deadline and very strict cost controls, but we did a great job of finding creative solutions. I specifically found a way to use new materials that simultaneously increased the effectiveness and reduced the cost of the restraint systems.

After two years, I asked to be moved into the Safety Engineering department, because the safety-related projects that I had worked on had really captured my imagination. The move also appealed to me because it represented my first opportunity to gain experience in managing others full-time. I moved into that group as a Senior Engineer, and was permanently put in charge of a team of four designers. We worked on a series of projects to improve the safety of Midwest Motor vehicles in small but important ways. The achievement I'm proudest of is leading my team to develop a new, safer design for fuel systems in SUVs, which I presented to senior management all the way up to the level of Vice President of our division. The company is implementing the new design this year.

While I still enjoyed the engineering aspects of the job, what I found to be most rewarding was working with people from other functions, including Production, Finance, and even Marketing. For the first time, I realized how much my decisions affected their jobs, and vice versa. It gave me a new appreciation for teamwork. I also learned how to work with people whom I didn't directly influence. Learning how to get things done by influencing others is something that I've been working on for the last year. I'm also working on applying this skill in the Great Lakes Foundation, a nonprofit group that I've been involved with for two years. I do fund-raising for the organization, and have gained a lot of experience in persuading people to donate their time and money to the cause of helping inner-city children find creative outlets for their talents.

Now that I've had a taste of how an entire organization works, I'm interested in one day building my own manufacturing business, particularly one that will help make transportation safer and more fuel-efficient. To do so, I would like to gain an even broader view of how to run a business. While I'll always be an engineer at heart, I now want to learn more about marketing, finance, and how to lead people. From my experience, I see these as the skills that make for the most effective managers. I then want to put these skills to use in running my own business. Given my experiences and my desire to gain new ones, I think now is the perfect time to enter the Johnson School at Cornell.

Your own elevator pitch may be less involved than this one (and you may find that you don't even get all the way through yours if your interviewer hears something interesting and wants to dive right in), but this example gives you an idea of what you want to do. This applicant does a good job of:

- ☐ Communicating his high-level application themes, which are his passion for cars, his experience leading teams to results, and his specific reasons for wanting to go to school.
- ☐ Explicitly naming the results of what he worked on. Many applicants fail here; it not only matters what you did, but also what actually happened as a result of it.
- ☐ Highlighting what he specifically contributed as a member of a team. Applicants also tend to fail here by saying what "we" did, but never explicitly explaining what "I" did.
- ☐ Giving reasons for the moves that he made in his career, and making those reasons consistent with his overall story.
- ☐ Naming some of his extracurricular activities. Remember, business schools don't want someone who is married to his job!
- ☐ Tying together his past experiences into why he now wants to go to business school.

There is a balancing act here. You want to provide enough detail to make your story interesting, but you also don't want it to get too boring or bogged down in details. Develop your elevator pitch with what you feel is an adequate level of detail, and if you find that it's taking too long, then you can start to shave off details (which will likely be covered in other parts of your interview). Whatever you do, keep your high-level themes in there. After all, the main purpose of your elevator pitch is to get all of your main themes "out on the table."

The other questions are designed to see what you perceive your own strengths and weaknesses to be. Be honest when answering about your strengths and weaknesses. Your interviewer won't be impressed if you say that your biggest weakness is that you're a perfectionist who just plain insists on working too hard. One thing you want to do, though, is to focus on skills rather than personality traits when talking about your weaknesses. For example, saying, "I need more experience managing teams and delegating authority," is better than answering with, "I tend to be impatient with others." The former is something that you can clearly improve with time and practice, while the latter is something that will likely never change. You will also win bonus points if you can briefly discuss ways in which you are trying to address your weaknesses. So, if you mention that you haven't had much experience managing teams, mention that you've requested to be placed on a project that would allow you to do so. This shows that you are aware of your growth opportunities and actively try to improve in those areas.

Questions about why you want to go to business school and future goals

These questions include:

- ☐ Why do you think now is the time for you to go back to school?

- ☐ What do you hope to learn in business school?
- ☐ What do you think you will contribute that will be unique among your classmates?
- ☐ Why do you want to come to this school?
- ☐ Where else are you applying?
- ☐ Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

Some of these will overlap with the previous questions. Don't be surprised if you cover one of these areas in your elevator pitch, only to have your interviewer dig much deeper later in the interview. Most of these answers will come directly from your application. In your essays, you hopefully will do a good job of explaining your goals and why business school makes sense for you; now it is just a matter of verbalizing these reasons.

In order to answer the "Why do you want to come to this school" question well, you obviously will need to have done your homework on the school. It's amazing that applicants still make the mistake of telling a general management school such as Harvard that they want to go there because they want to become marketing experts. Be ready to list several reasons for wanting to attend the school, including both tangible (curriculum offered, location) and intangible (culture, learning environment). You may be tempted to find the school's curriculum and to rattle off several names of classes in your interview, but be careful unless you can mention more about those courses, beyond their names. Interviewers know that anyone can find a few course names on the Web in a matter of minutes.

When answering the "Where else are you applying?" question, don't be afraid to be honest. The main thing is to have a reason for why each school appeals to you. You don't need to have the same reason for each school, and you may never even end up discussing your reasons, but it helps to have them ready. Admissions officers want to see if the schools you've selected have any commonalities or if you're simply gunning for the highest ranked school that will take you. If you're talking to an interviewer from a lower-ranked school and you rattle off a bunch of top-10 schools, the message can come through that you view the school as a safety. Don't waste your breath in an interview talking about other schools any more than you have to, but be prepared to answer the question if the interviewer presses you on this.

Questions about specific experiences in your background

Some schools will spend most of the interview on these kinds of questions. These types of questions are the ones that famously start with, "Tell me about a time when you...." The idea here is to go deeper than your philosophy on how to manage others, how to prioritize projects, etc., and to hear about how you actually handled these challenges in the past. Your job is to recall experiences from your background that will answer these questions, and to sum them up in tidy two- or three-minute stories that will help your interviewer see exactly what you did in a specific situation and what the result was.

There is a popular technique that successful applicants use to answer these kinds of questions. Most of your answers will ideally be broken down into the situation that you

faced, the actions that you took, and the results of your actions. Not surprisingly, this technique is called “SAR,” for Situation, Action, and Result. You can start your preparation by building a table that includes questions that you can expect along with your answers, broken down into the SAR format. After a short while, you will likely find that this technique feels very natural for telling your stories.

Below are a few sample questions, with fictitious answers entered into the SAR grid:

Question	Situation	Action	Result
Tell me about a time when you led a team to success despite opposition from others.	I was asked by my company's sales director to develop a version of our software for a new platform. I pulled together a team of developers to produce the product, but the VP of product management resisted, saying that it was a waste of time and effort.	I made a point of understanding why the VP was opposed to the project. I realized he was unhappy that the sales team came directly to the developers to make it happen. He was also dealing with flat sales on his existing products. I addressed each of these concerns, getting him involved in the process and showing him customer feedback that suggested that the new product could boost sales.	The VP gave his support to the project, and we rolled it out in under six months. The new product was a success, and now all of our products are being translated for the new platform. The sales director and product management VP both personally thanked me for making it happen.
Discuss a project that required the use of your analytical skills.	My boss asked me to identify and recommend some new potential sales targets for a product of ours that was facing slow sales. I knew little about the product or its market.	I met with one of our data analysts to identify the common traits among out current buyers. I then dug into market research data to find potential customers who exhibited similar traits. I recommended that we try a direct mail campaign targeted towards a segment that we hadn't previously considered.	The direct marketing test was a success, and we rolled out the campaign nationally. While sales had previously been declining 10 percent per year, this new campaign helped the product see its first double-digit sales gain since it was first launched.
Describe a time when you inspired someone to work harder.	I was running a civil engineering project that consisted for myself and two engineers. We were asked by a client to design a drainage system for it's property. The unique landscape of the property meant we couldn't apply normal solutions to the problem. However, one member of my team was very busy with other projects and insisted on using a standard solution.	I knew that she was very busy, so I talked to her boss to free her up of some lower-priority projects that were consuming much of her time. Her boss agreed to do so after seeing how valuable this contract was. I then appealed to her creativity. I knew she took a great deal of pride in the work that she did, and I talked to her about how exciting it would be to design a solution that no one had developed before.	Once some of her time was freed up, she became passionate about the project and threw herself into it with the rest of the team. We ended up designing a new system that performed great and saved us and the client a total of \$15 million. We couldn't have done it without her intelligence and energy. I made sure she was acknowledged for her hard work and we've had a great working relationship ever since.

Each of your answers should take two to three minutes (you can actually tell a pretty in-depth story in this amount of time). Of the SAR components, the situation is the least important. It's critical in that it sets up the next two parts, but don't spend too much time on it. You want to provide just enough background to make the interviewer understand the situation, and ideally to make her care. Err on the side of being brief, and the interviewer will stop you and ask for more depth if needed. For a three-minute answer, less than one minute should be spent on the situation, roughly a minute and a half should be spent on the specific actions that you took, and the remainder on the results.

As mentioned before, two places where applicants often fail are in not stating what the results were, and in failing to mention what they specifically did to help reach a goal. Interviewers will be much more impressed if you can point to tangible results that came about as a direct result of what you did. Saying “We gained \$5 million in business because of the ideas I implemented to make the product more reliable,” is much more powerful than saying “We gained new business by making the product better.” Be specific about what you did, and the results that you created.

This framework will work for nearly any question in which you’re asked to describe a situation that you faced and how you resolved it. Ideally, you will be able to prepare for the questions that you are most likely to receive, and to outline an answer for each using the SAR framework. The great thing about SAR, though, is that it also helps you organize your verbal answers to questions that you didn’t anticipate. If you find yourself faced with a question like this, take a deep breath, think about an example that could be used to answer the question, and start talking in the SAR format. If you find yourself still talking about the situation after a minute, move on and get to the meat of the story.

With a decent amount of preparation, such surprises should be minimized. Still, it is impossible to prepare for every single question that you will be asked, so being prepared to think on your feet is as critical as preparing for specific questions. The following is a list of common questions that you might expect to get in a business school interview. Plug these into your own SAR grid and try to develop real-world stories from your own experiences:

Leadership

- ☐ Discuss a time when you successfully supervised a diverse group of people toward a difficult goal.
- ☐ Give an example of when you accomplished something significant that wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t been there.
- ☐ Tell me about a situation where you had to persuade someone to agree with your point of view.
- ☐ Describe a time when you had to gain upper management’s support for an idea/proposal.
- ☐ Name a time when you had to convince someone who didn’t report directly to you to do something they didn’t want to do.
- ☐ Describe a situation in which you identified key problems early on in a project and were able to avert a crisis.
- ☐ Tell me about a time when you led a team to a goal even though the individual team members were skeptical that it could be accomplished.
- ☐ Discuss a time when you had to make an unpopular decision.

Teamwork

- ☐ Tell me about the toughest group that you ever worked in. What made it so tough, and how did you handle it?

- ☐ Describe a time when you had a conflict with another person in a corporate or school setting.
- ☐ Tell me about a time when you worked with someone who didn't follow through. What did you do?
- ☐ How have you dealt with a person who was difficult to work with?

Ethics

- ☐ Describe an ethical dilemma that you faced in your career. How did you resolve it?
- ☐ Give me an example of when you pushed back against doing something.
- ☐ What is the hardest decision you have ever had to make on the job? Outside of your job?

Innovation

- ☐ Name a time when you developed a unique and resourceful solution to a problem.
- ☐ Describe a situation when you had to make an important decision without having all of the necessary information at hand.
- ☐ Tell me about a time when you had to analyze facts quickly, identify the issues, and develop an action plan.
- ☐ Give me an example of when you thought out of the box.
- ☐ Tell me about a time when you took a smart risk.
- ☐ Have you ever had to bend a rule to get your work done more efficiently?

Maturity

- ☐ Tell me about your most spectacular failure. What happened? What did you learn?
- ☐ Discuss a time when you didn't succeed on the first try.
- ☐ What is the worst professional decision you have ever made?
- ☐ Tell me about a time when you weren't very pleased with your performance.
- ☐ Describe a situation in which you wish you had acted differently with someone in your group.

One note: For “failure” questions, don't be afraid to admit your failures. The most important thing that an interviewer is looking for with these kinds of questions is evidence that you learned from your past mistakes. Ideally, your answer will consist of what happened, what went wrong, what you learned, and how you applied that lesson in a later situation.

How to carry yourself in interview

In your admissions interview, you want to come across as personable, confident, interested, interesting, and sincere. For everyone one of these descriptors, think of the

opposite. No one would want to be surrounded by arrogant, tentative, indifferent, dull, or phony people. In short, you want to convey that you are who you said you are in your application, and you want to show the interviewer that you're someone who would make a great classmate in business school. Yes, this may seem daunting, given the application themes that you already want to communicate. Most of these personality traits, though, should come through if you can relax and simply be yourself.

For the most part, your interviewer will set the tone of the discussion. As described earlier, some will be laid back and interested in getting to know you personally, while others will want to drill down on specific parts of your resume or application. Obviously, how serious or informal you are will largely depend on the person across from you. Your job is to make adjustments accordingly, and to answer the questions that they ask. But you must make sure that by the end of the interview you have covered the main themes that you came in with. For instance, you may have a laid-back, "get to know you" kind of interviewer who doesn't ask you the kinds of pointed questions that would allow you to talk about your strengths. If this is the case, it's perfectly appropriate to say, "By the way, there are a couple of things that I think make me a good fit for this school. I'd like to talk about them and hear your thoughts," before the interview is over. You don't want to be too transparent, but all but the most inept interviewers will appreciate the fact that there are certain ideas that you're trying to get across before the discussion is over.

If you have a stone-faced interviewer who won't laugh at your jokes, don't press the matter. Act professionally, answer the questions that are asked, and make sure to hit your main themes. In a way, these interviews can sometimes be easier because the interviewer's business-like questions will more likely give you a chance to strut your stuff. If you have a downright hostile interviewer (which happens from time to time), don't let yourself get flustered or goaded into an argument. Relax, think of it as the interviewer's half-baked way of testing your mettle, and answer the questions as they come. Don't be argumentative, but don't be afraid to be assertive, either. A hostile interviewer may be looking for poise and confidence more than anything else, so make sure to demonstrate these.

At the end of the interview, ask a couple good questions. Good questions don't have answers that you could have gotten from the school's Website or brochure. If you are interviewing with an alum or a student, asking about her experience is always a good place to start. Similarly, if you are interviewing with an admissions counselor or a faculty member, asking about the direction of the curriculum will generally generate an interesting response.

Interview etiquette

It is considered appropriate to send your interviewer a short thank-you note after the interview. There is a small debate over whether that thank-you note should be e-mailed or handwritten. The benefit to e-mailing a thank-you note is that the interviewer is likely to receive it prior to submitting the evaluation report. A well-written note can reinforce your message and leave the interviewer with a positive feeling about your candidacy. The handwritten note, however, adds a personal touch that some

applicants insist outweighs e-mail's "speed factor." The bottom line is that this is not a decision worth losing sleep over, as it won't have an impact on the school's decision to admit you. You should choose the method with which you feel most comfortable. Regardless of the communication method, keep it brief and try to echo one or two topics that were discussed during the interview.

Our view is that interviewing will continue to become a more important application component with time. Schools consistently mention that it is a great way to differentiate applicants. It is important that you understand how to make your story come alive during the interview. Just as important, you should communicate a distinct passion for the school and its mission. Demonstrating this level of fit and desire will get you one step closer to acceptance.

Essays

After GMAT preparation, writing your essays will likely be the most time-consuming part of the application process. Admissions directors often cite essays as the most important part of the application. The combination of these two factors means that you should dedicate a significant amount of time (15–25 hours per application) to producing powerful and persuasive essays that are succinct in style.

Your essays should be the base upon which all other application components are built. You can think of your essays as a platform that can be used to tell your personal and professional story. You have flexibility in terms of tone, so feel free to utilize a professional, informal, or humorous voice in establishing your story. The other components (recommendations, interview, resume, and data sheets) should substantiate that story. The more aligned your components are around common themes, the more positive the impact on your application. We will discuss putting together a game plan that links all of the components in Chapter 6.

As part of the storytelling process, you should try to augment your strengths and anticipate your perceived weaknesses. Use the analysis from Chapter 2 and the profiles in Chapter 3 in identifying and addressing both. In sum, your essays should effectively communicate your differentiated position, your embodiment of the four dimensions, and your fit with the school. As frustrating as the essay-writing process may seem, ultimately it helps crystallize your reasons for wanting to go to b-school and some of your career objectives.

The rest of this section will review what admissions committees typically look for in essays, essay types that candidates predictably come across, samples of successful essays, and a prescription for how to approach the writing process.

What are admissions committees looking for in the essays?

There are essentially three aspects of your essays that will be explicitly or implicitly evaluated by admissions officers:

- ❑ **Content:** In response to the question, "What mistakes do applicants commonly make?" admissions officers often respond that many applicants fail to adequately address the essay's questions. Seems like a stupid mistake

to make, but many applicants “copy and paste” an essay that doesn’t quite fit, try to “shoehorn” responses that don’t answer all of the questions’ elements, or just completely miss the point of the essay. Regardless of the reason, not succinctly answering essay questions is an easy way to win your application a quick trip to the “ding” pile. Many other applicants are guilty of simply rehashing their resumes, offering nothing new in their essays that lets the admissions committee know who they really are. In general, you need to answer the questions asked, and do it in a way that helps the admissions committee see you as a person, not a GMAT score and a data sheet.

- ❑ **Grammar:** It doesn’t matter how strong your story is if your essays are riddled with grammatical errors. Poor grammar dilutes essay responses and can ruin the best applicant’s chances. You should focus on ensuring that you are using appropriate syntax, idioms, and sentence structure. Additionally, beware of run-on sentences, as they often lead admission counselors to confusion. Being concise and clear will always benefit your cause. Grammar is usually the area of essay-writing where having a second, third, and even fourth set of eyeballs can provide the most immediate help.
- ❑ **Structure and parameters:** Maintaining an organized structure and a logical flow of ideas will help increase the impact of your statements. Consider, especially for longer essays, using headers to help guide the reader. Another consideration in terms of structure is word usage. While you certainly want to be descriptive in your writing, stay away from esoteric vocabulary. Your goal is to effectively communicate ideas, not to show off your knowledge of the English language. Finally, make sure that you observe word limits. As a rule, you shouldn’t surpass word limits by more than 10 percent. Going beyond that can be an easy way to buy a “ding.” Remember that admissions counselors are reviewing thousands of applications, so they can be very sensitive to applicants who don’t respect word limits.

Essay types

As you move from one application to another, you will encounter many essay questions that are similar in nature. We’ve found that there are basically 10 different types of essays that you will come across:

- ❑ Future goals and school fit.
- ❑ Leadership and initiative.
- ❑ Teamwork.
- ❑ Ethics.
- ❑ Personal philosophy.
- ❑ Personal evaluation.
- ❑ Hobbies.
- ❑ Diversity.

- ☐ Professional experience.
- ☐ Failure.

The types of essays that a school includes on its application are a reflection of that school's approach to learning and the sort of applicant for which it looks. Therefore, it is imperative for you to understand the implications that underlie the essay questions. While we will cover the implications, it is important to note that essays don't always fall into one of these discrete buckets. For example, a question might ask about your approach to leading teams, which obviously touches upon both the teamwork and leadership themes.

The sample essays express ways in which successful applicants have played on those themes. The applicants received admission to at least one of the schools reviewed in Chapter 5 and their backgrounds are diverse in terms of work experience, gender, academic background, ethnicity, nationality, GMAT scores, GPA, etc. For each essay, we provide some commentary on the applicant's perspective and highlight the attributes that resonated positively with the admission committee. While no essay is necessarily perfect, these essays should help you in creating ideas for your own approach. And crafting your own approach is the key. This is *your* MBA game plan, after all.

Future goals and school fit

This type of essay is almost universally used in applications. Of the 30 schools reviewed, 28 included this essay type in their applications. This should give you an idea of how important fit is to schools.

For the most part, this question type is trying to drive at whether now is the best time for you to get your MBA. Additionally, schools want to know how they fit into your long-term plans. Lastly, the school wants to know how you envision yourself having an impact, either in your career, or more broadly, on society. Most schools are not looking for you to state an exact position in which you envision yourself, but rather where and how you see yourself having an influence. Many applicants fall short in this essay by providing a very generic response in terms of their future goals. Simply stating that you want to move into private wealth management is not enough. You must go a step beyond that, explain how you see yourself having an influence in that field, and explain how the school fits into the picture.

Many times this question type will ask for a summary of your professional background and then ask you to relate it to the school and your career goals. Be careful not to simply rehash your resume. Rather, provide some context as to why you've made the choices that have led you to where you are today. The three components (professional background, school, future goals) should be linked in a fluid manner. You should highlight your strengths, outline your future goals, and then underscore how the school will help you build additional strengths in order to achieve those goals.

Some examples of questions that fall into this type:

- ☐ *Why have you decided to pursue an MBA? (Dartmouth College—Tuck)*
- ☐ *Discuss your career goals and why you want an MBA degree. How will the skills you have developed to date contribute to your effectiveness in fulfilling your post-MBA career objectives? (UCLA—Anderson)*

- ❑ *What are your short-term and long-term post-MBA goals? How will Columbia Business School help you achieve those goals? (Columbia Business School)*
- ❑ *Describe your short-term and long-term career objectives after completing your MBA. What experience and attributes do you possess that would make you a good fit for that position? (Emory—Goizueta)*

Sample essay

Briefly assess your career progress to date. Elaborate on your future career plans and your motivation for pursuing a graduate degree at the Kellogg School.

Where I've been

I joined Withers Incorporated after graduating from Dawson University in order to experience numerous business practices across multiple functions. During my tenure at Withers, I have made substantial contributions on both a global and local level to our customers and internal initiatives. Operations and corporate finance are the primary areas in which I have practiced.

Over the last year, I have narrowed my focus to financial cost analysis. As a leading contributor to a \$32 million cost reduction effort, I have expanded my knowledge of finance beyond the surface level. In order to expedite an assessment of the Firm's financial situation and gain an understanding of primary business drivers, I created financial models for four major business units whose yearly technology expenditures exceeded \$400 million. I provided my expertise to over 20 individual business and technology partners to validate cost reduction opportunities, and implement cost reduction plans. By developing and honing cost reduction skills and understanding how to create strategies oriented towards reducing the bottom line of a company's budget, I have become a valuable asset to the Firm, even in an unstable economy. — — — — —

The applicant does a good job of quantifying the impact he had on the organization. By showing his ability to work in a numbers-oriented environment, he helped "make up" for a quantitative GMAT score that fell a little bit below Kellogg's mean.

Exemplary results and the exhibition of strong management capabilities in Firm initiatives led to my appointment to the Global Finance Advisory Council (GFAC), a premier leadership group within the Firm. The primary function of the 10-member GFAC is to proactively shape and influence the direction of Withers' financial position from a macro level.

In an effort to provide consistency and standardize business units' approach to financing operations, I am leading an effort to create protocols for over 2,000 managers globally. Developing standard protocols for the entire Firm has required me to adjust my communication style according to the business unit and geographical region. — — — — —

Clearly a demonstration of the leadership dimension. The applicant's strategy was to emphasize leadership in this essay, and the teamwork dimension in the interview and in a separate essay.

Where I'm going

As a result of working closely with multiple business units, I've gained a strong interest in initiating my own venture. — — —

Nice transition. Coupled with the header, it makes the direction of the essay clear.

This ambition drives me toward my professional goal: to redefine American fashion by developing an import business that specializes in a mélange of South American and North American clothing. In my travels and research, I have observed a growing interest in multi-ethnic clothing that uses fabrics, prints, and styles that are not indigenous to the U.S. Market studies have shown a strong demand on the West Coast for clothing and articles with South American motifs. Although these types of products exist in the United States, they are generally not marketed or distributed adequately, and are not tailored to the average American. I believe there is opportunity to promote a new line of fashion that fuses the cultures of the North and the South. Although at first glance this might appear to be a complete departure from my current career path, it will actually build upon the fundamental skills that I've acquired in the analysis of business models. Indeed, the ability to achieve operational efficiencies would be a key success driver in this mid-to low-margin business. — — —

Good discussion of future objectives. The applicant adds a nice touch by showing insight into the business and how his background could help him be successful.

The flexible Kellogg learning model would allow me to build upon these skills through its concentrations in entrepreneurship and marketing. Courses such as Entrepreneurship and New Venture Formulation, Managing Entrepreneurial Growth, Marketing Strategy, and Sales Promotion and Retailer Behavior would be vital assets in the development of my business model. During my visit to Kellogg, I was impressed by the way in which faculty actively show how theory works in practice. Being able to make that transition will also be vital to my success. — — —

Excellent work in terms of providing Kellogg specific information that would clearly be of benefit in achieving his career goal.

As a member of the Kellogg community, I would actively engage in the diverse range of global forums, club activities, and business plan competitions. All of these opportunities would bolster my efforts in becoming a successful entrepreneur. — — —

Could make the essay a bit stronger by providing some more Kellogg-specifics in this section.

Leadership and initiative

B-schools' increased emphasis on leadership is reflected in the large proliferation of this essay type. Many schools even have more than one question of this type on their applications. Questions will generally ask you to describe a situation in which you displayed leadership, initiative, and/or creativity. Schools are trying to gain an understanding of your approach to leadership and the style(s) you employ when the situation calls for it.

These are great questions for utilizing the SAR framework, which was discussed in the interview section. It is important that you cover each component of SAR in order

to maximize the impact of your essays. We suggest that you try and dedicate approximately 30 percent of the word limit to the situation, 50 percent to your actions, and 20 percent to the result. While there is no hard and fast rule, this is just a guideline that can be helpful in evaluating whether you have dedicated enough time to each part. While b-schools are most interested in your actions and the result of those actions, setting the context of the situation is vital to understanding the other components. The takeaway is that, although you might write more for one component than another, they are all key to writing a solid leadership and initiative essay.

In many cases, schools will focus a portion of the question on teamwork, so don't think of the two as mutually exclusive. Indeed, showing that you have the ability to lead in a team environment is probably more important than showing your ability to lead on an individual level.

Some examples of questions that fall into this type:

- ❑ *Part of leadership is the ability to make a difference under difficult circumstances. With this in mind, describe a situation in which you exhibited such leadership. (Yale School of Management)*
- ❑ *Describe a situation where leadership and teamwork were critical to the outcome of a project in which you were directly involved. What did you learn from the experience and how have you applied what you learned to other situations? (University of Pennsylvania—The Wharton School)*
- ❑ *Please give an example of when you had an impact on a person, group, or organization. Please describe the situation, your actions, and the results. (MIT—Sloan)*
- ❑ *Describe a situation in which you used your leadership skills to assist a team in successfully completing a project or achieving a goal. (University of Western Ontario—Ivey)*

Sample essay

What makes work fulfilling? Describe a situation where, as a team member or project leader, you have made work more interesting or enjoyable for your group. (University of Michigan Business School)

The thing I remember most about my first day as a Regional Manager at Global Rent-A-Car is that no one else wanted to be there. In fact, one of my new employees mentioned that he did not enjoy coming to work because he had nothing to show for it. I understood what he meant: The office was last in every category—profit numbers, customer service, and fleet growth. Even more interesting to me was when he mentioned that he did not trust the other employees in the office because he felt like no one wanted the office to be a success. I began to realize that the negative attitude in the office was not due completely to our poor performance, but to a lack of teamwork between the employees. — — — — —

Great details in here. Gives the reader the feeling that the applicant has his work cut out for him.

That day I made it my mission to make the office a more desirable, fun place to work. I started by doing the least desirable activity myself—washing cars. By doing the job everyone liked least, I hoped the employees would begin to trust me. Indeed, my employees told me that when they saw me washing cars, they realized that the goals of the office were more important to me than keeping my suit clean and that I had proved to them that the team took priority over the individual. To encourage them to get to know each other better, I started to take them out, as a group, every Thursday evening for drinks and appetizers at a nearby restaurant. Soon the employees were joking with each other and I could see that they were becoming closer.

As our team began to trust each other on a personal level, they began to trust each other on a professional one. I encouraged one employee who felt “trapped” in the office all day, to take donuts to the corporate accounts in our area. At the end of the month we sat down and counted the number of referrals we had received from her sales calls. When she saw the increase in referrals from the month before, she began to realize that she was truly making a difference in our profits. She began to encourage the other employees to become involved in the marketing plan. Within six months we had increased our corporate business by almost 100 percent, and it was directly attributable to the team marketing effort. — — — — —

Great discussion of the actions taken to resolve the issues the organization was facing.

Under my leadership, we began to see our income and profit numbers skyrocket. I am now convinced that leadership cannot simply be an order from a supervisor, it must come from dedication to a vision that is greater than any individual. Our success was due in part to the fact that the employees began motivating each other. I now know that what makes work fulfilling is being part of something that you have helped create, and knowing that your efforts on the team are making a positive impact. My washing cars was a small price to pay for the kind of turnaround my team achieved in nine months and the dividends that accrued from working together. — — — — —

The applicant does a nice job of stating the results and then mentioning what he learned. He is also careful to make sure to answer the first part of the essay question.

Teamwork

While many essays on leadership dedicate a portion of the question to teamwork, there are some that focus purely on the interactions and relationships that you have with others. We consider these “genuine” teamwork questions. The admission committee is looking to see how you communicate and cooperate in a group environment. Therefore, expressing your interpersonal skills is an essential part of answering these types of questions.

Similar to questions on leadership, teamwork questions sometimes ask you to reflect on a situation. As such, using the SAR framework for these question types can be a great way to respond to them. Although SAR can be a great framework to use, don't feel chained to it. If you have a more creative and powerful way to get your points across, then go for it. Remember, SAR is just a framework to help you organize your thoughts.

Some examples of questions that fall into this type:

- ❑ *Using an example from your work experience, describe what factors contribute to a dysfunctional team experience. What steps can the individual or group take to help alleviate this situation and help develop a constructive team environment? (Michigan State University—Broad)*
- ❑ *Please give us an example of a difficult interaction you had with someone. Please describe the situation, what was difficult about it, and how you resolved it. (MIT—Sloan)*

Sample essay

Describe an experience in which the relationships you developed enhanced the outcome of a team effort. (Columbia Business School)

A few years ago, I participated in a cross-continent choir that was composed of members from France and the United States. As a part of the American contingent, I traveled to Paris for vocal training and performances.

Arriving in Paris, we met our French counterparts for the first time and were immediately overwhelmed. Although we had considerable talent, and had performed several times together in the States, our French team members were well-known throughout the European continent. We felt additional pressure, as most of the songs we were to sing together were to be sung in French. For months prior to the trip we practiced the inflections and intonations that were to be used while singing the French compositions, but it became immediately apparent that we were far from meeting their standard.

Initially, the choir was fragmented based on citizenship. The cultural environment and the skills of the French team members intimidated us. In order to counteract the intimidation factor, I asked the choir director if each U.S. choir member could partner with a French choir member. The director agreed that having us pair off would be a good relationship builder and I was soon chatting it up with my partner, Serge.

Nice description of why the team was initially fragmented.

I asked questions as they came to mind in an attempt to understand the French language, culture, and music. Serge often responded with his own questions and a dynamic dialogue ensued. Outside of the formal choir practices, Serge and I held

sessions that focused on the proper pronunciation and delivery of the songs. In addition to learning more about the music, I began to learn more about the culture and the language.

Over the next few weeks, Serge and I became inseparable. I learned that despite the initial surface differences that existed, we were very similar at the root. We both wanted respect, understanding, and the opportunity to succeed. Furthermore, I was amazed at the new perspectives and insights on life that I gained from him. The result was that I not only developed my vocal talents, but also realized a new appreciation for other cultures and the possibilities for improved communication across geographical borders.

Terrific explanation of the actions taken to build the relationship.

My American compatriots had experiences similar to mine and we found that as a result of our newfound relationships, we performed on an entirely higher level. When we first practiced as a unit, one could easily distinguish our voices. Now we truly sounded like a single unit. The audiences were extremely receptive to our performances and unanimity. In fact, we went on to win first place in a regional competition.

This experience taught me the power of relationship building. No doubt our choir would still have been successful without partnering up. Still, I don't think our harmonies and melodies would have sounded as pure and I know that we wouldn't have had as much fun. Now I always look to build an understanding with my colleagues in order to enhance team dynamics.

The applicant does an excellent job of relaying the results of the actions and what she learned from the experience.

Ethics

Many applicants struggle in coming up with examples to use for essays that ask about ethics. If you think about it long enough, however, you can certainly come up with an example in which your sense of ethics was tested. A relevant story doesn't need to be as intriguing as a corporate scandal; many of the best ethics essays deal with subtle issues, such as making a tough decision when you could have gotten away with less. For many questions, your response doesn't necessarily have to reflect on a professional situation.

Admissions committees are most interested in understanding your thought process in approaching ethical situations, so you should dedicate a good portion of your essay to that. Just like with other situation questions, you can use the SAR framework for most of these question types. Discussing your thought process generally would fall under the "Action" section.

Some examples of questions that fall into this type:

- ❑ Please describe an ethical issue that you have faced in your professional life, how you dealt with the situation, and what the outcome was. (Carnegie Mellon University—GSIA)

- ❑ Describe an ethical dilemma that you have faced and how it was resolved.
(Northwestern University—Kellogg)

Sample essay

Discuss an ethical dilemma that you experienced firsthand. How did you manage and resolve the situation? (Harvard Business School)

It's funny how powerful the desire to receive accolades can be. As far back as I can remember, I've always sought approval from my superiors; whether they've been my parents, teachers, or managers. That's why it was so difficult for me to not fulfill my manager's request.

The request came two months after I started working for Ong Semiconductors as an economic analyst. My manager asked me to conduct a comprehensive market analysis for a new product we were planning to release in the next year.

Eager to prove myself, I dug right into the analysis. I estimated the •450 million market potential by hosting discussions with potential customers, analyzing research reports, and speaking with analysts. Working with engineers, I calculated the manufacturing costs at different production levels. Finally, I completed a competitive analysis that highlighted other companies' abilities to compete in the market. After working four 70-hour weeks, I submitted a draft of my analysis to my manager. — — — — —

Nice details in this paragraph. The applicant does a great job of providing the details of her hard work, highlighting her capabilities even in an "ethics" essay.

Apparently, it wasn't good enough. The competitive analysis didn't reach my manager's expectations. He began to press me to include more details, specifically details regarding my former employer. My manager requested that I include proprietary information on a potentially competing product on which my previous firm was working. The information request included: technical specifications, cost data, and the product launch date. It was clear that I was being asked to break a good faith understanding I had with my old firm not to reveal proprietary information.

I could've easily provided all of the information and satisfied my manager's request. I probably would've received major accolades for the insights. Indeed, I'm confident that there wouldn't have been any direct ramifications for revealing the information. Still, based on my sense of ethics, I simply could not break the understanding I had reached with my old company. I did my best to explain this to my manager. — — — — —

The applicant effectively conveys the ethical dilemma and takes the reader through her thought process.

Needless to say, he wasn't pleased with my stance. A short time after our discussion, I was removed from the project. Over time, I discovered that the company had a history of conducting

competitive analyses that bordered on corporate espionage. Three months after being removed from the project, I put in my notice and subsequently left the firm. A year later, several executives were investigated for illegal competitive practices. — — —

This paragraph shows that the applicant is willing to take action based on her convictions. She also subtly explains her five month stint with the firm; something that would otherwise be viewed negatively.

Reflecting on my experiences, I'm proud of the way I acted. While compliance would have allowed me to satisfy my manager's request, it would have also placed me on an ethical "slippery slope." I've reached the conclusion that before I seek approval from my superiors, I must first seek approval from myself. This continues to be a personal philosophy that I actively practice. — — — — —

As all applicants should, she explains what she learned from the experience. The closing is also very effective in that it ties back to the introduction.

Personal philosophy

Personal philosophy essays focus on your overall perspective on life. They often ask you to reveal “life-changing” experiences or to discuss something that is extremely important to you. Here, the admissions committee is really trying to get to know you and find out what drives you. A portion of the essay will often ask you to describe what you’ve learned from the experience. Responding to that is imperative because it provides insight into how you learn and what you value.

You will run into at least one personal philosophy essay on most applications, so you should spend some time thinking about the message you want to send. Once you’ve identified your message, it is important that you communicate it with passion. While passion should be threaded throughout your entire application, it should ooze out of this essay.

Some examples of questions that fall into this type:

- ☐ *We all experience significant events or “milestones” that influence the course of our lives. Briefly describe such an event and how it affected you.* (USC—Marshall)
- ☐ *What unique personal qualities and/or life experiences distinguish you from other applicants?* (University of Rochester—Simon)
- ☐ *Imagine that you will be taking a 72 hour car ride with two other individuals. If you could choose your travel companions, whom would you choose and why? (These individuals can be living or deceased.)* (University of Maryland—Smith)
- ☐ *What matters most to you, and why?* (Stanford)

Sample essay

Please tell us something else about yourself that you feel will help the Admissions Committee know you better. (University of Pennsylvania—Wharton)

My name

My middle name is Carlson. Carlson is a family name, passed on to me from my grandfather Michael Carlson

Stevenson. It is a representation of the heritage and the legacy that I have been bestowed. It is also a reflection of the standard to which I will be held. In every facet of his life, Grandfather has been a visionary striving for excellence. He has extended his vision through education and servitude. Expanding the legacy of my Grandfather is extremely important to me, because failing to do so would be to dishonor the very name that I bear.— — —

Interesting introduction, which speaks to the applicant's motivations.

My grandfather

Grandfather has six sons, all of whom have either an M.D. or a Ph.D. Success in education was always emphasized in his household. Grandfather views education as a key that is necessary for achievement. If one is educated, Grandfather says, than he can effectively decide his own fate and help positively impact the fate of others. Grandfather himself holds a B.A. and an M.A. in education administration. After earning his degrees, Grandfather went on to start his own private school for pre-school to middle school students. He feels that if children are shown the value of education while they are young then they will not depart from that teaching as they grow older. As a result, he not only educated his own children, but also hundreds of children in his surrounding neighborhoods. He has provided education support through his own teachings, the establishment of scholarships, and career counseling.

As a public servant, Grandfather is well-known both domestically and internationally. In addition to his education initiatives, Grandfather has served his local community through the church that he pastors. Community service functions have included: Feeding and clothing the needy, and supplying financial support for area building projects. At an international level, Grandfather has provided support to initiatives in more than five nations, such as Haiti, Ghana, and Liberia. On several occasions, he has personally traveled to these emerging markets and directly assisted with the projects. The projects have ranged from the construction of schools, to the dispersion of food, to the building of churches.— — — — —

Family is clearly important to the applicant. The discussion of education provides some insight into his motivation for applying to b-school.

My turn

I have found truth in Grandfather's beliefs on education and servitude. My successes have mainly been a result of effective preparation, which equates to proper education. Once knowledge has been obtained, I believe that it should be freely shared. As such, I am intrigued with the persuasive power inherent to speaking and writing. Whether it is delivering the commencement address to my graduating college class, writing

editorials for the local newspaper, or leading a discussion on career success with indigent populations, I enjoy speaking and writing into the lives of others with candor and truth. Communication contains the possibilities of inspiration, reconciliation, and illumination. To communicate well is to be understood. To communicate powerfully is to effect change. I will effect change. My middle name is Carlson.— — — — —

This paragraph gives the admissions committee good examples of the applicant's commitment to education, communication, and community service. This essay really aligned well with the applicant's career objectives to start a nonprofit organization. The applicant also expressed an interest in starting a magazine that focuses on global community service opportunities.

The closing is nicely linked back to the opening.

Personal evaluation

This essay type calls for applicants to provide a perspective on themselves. That perspective is often asked to be given in an evaluation style. The admissions committee is looking to see how you view yourself in terms of strengths and growth opportunities. Although you certainly don't want to cast yourself as inept, describing one or two areas in which you can develop is as important as depicting your strengths. It is important because the committee is interested to know how you can benefit from its learning model, so make sure you describe a connection between your growth areas and the school's strengths.

The most effective personal evaluation response supports your overall story in addition to displaying fit with what the school has to offer. It is also important that your response doesn't contradict what your recommenders are saying. In other words, if you state that your interpersonal skills are some of your greatest assets and one of your recommenders writes that it's an area in which you need improvement, then the rest of your evaluation might be called into question. This is just one more reason why creating a game plan for yourself and for your recommenders can be such an effective tool.

Finally, as mentioned in the interview section, the weaknesses that you present will ideally be skill-based, more than personality-based. After all, there is no MBA course that can change someone's personality. Keep this in mind as you choose which weaknesses to discuss.

Some examples of questions that fall into this type:

- ❑ *Is your academic performance to date an accurate predictor of your potential for success at London Business School? If so, why? If not, why not?* (University of London—London Business School)
- ❑ *You have been selected as a member of the Kellogg Admissions Committee. Please provide a brief evaluative assessment of your file.* (Northwestern University—Kellogg)
- ❑ *If you could change one characteristic about yourself, what would it be?* (UC Berkeley—Haas)
- ❑ *Creatively describe yourself to your MBA classmates. You may use any method to convey your message: words, illustrations, etc.* (NYU—Stern)

Sample essay

Give a candid description of yourself, stressing the personal characteristics you feel to be your strengths and weaknesses and the main factors which have influenced your personal development, giving examples when necessary. (INSEAD)

Kaizen

The Japanese have a concept known as “kaizen,” which roughly translated means continuous improvement. In recent history, this term has become most closely associated with the improvement of manufacturing operations and adopted as a mantra by several companies. However, the original meaning of the word kaizen carries an even more noble intent than business success—its intent is a successful life. A person adopting the philosophy of kaizen knows that human perfection is unattainable, yet strives to achieve it every day. Following this philosophy means always acting in a manner that increases knowledge and leads to personal development. Having always been a highly motivated person, this concept struck a chord with me and I adopted the philosophy of kaizen, making self-improvement a daily goal.

Over time, the adoption of this principle has allowed me to build strengths in several areas. While I realize I still have several areas in which I can grow, I know my belief in kaizen will help to address those areas. — — — — —

This section sets up a nice context for why the applicant is strong in certain areas and how she is able to identify the areas in which she needs to improve.

Strengths

My leadership skills, broad educational and professional experiences, analytical abilities, and strong personal presence are all strengths on which I continually rely.

The leadership skills I first developed playing team sports have allowed me to become a leader in my educational and professional endeavors. At Carella College, I was a founding member of the Investment Club and delivered presentations at most club meetings. While working for Amariglio Financials, I supervised a 35-employee department of mostly first and second generation Americans. With Taverna Holdings, I led client training sessions for over 50 employees, and have also served as a mentor to newly hired Taverna Associates. — — — — —

Rather than stating that leadership is a strength, the applicant goes a step further and provides nice examples of how she displayed leadership.

My broad educational and professional experiences developed my unique perspectives into business. Having examined companies from both an external shareholder view as a securities analyst and from an internal management perspective, I have insight into both the challenges faced by companies in developing and implementing strategic direction and the shareholder

perception of strategy's value, something every executive should evaluate. My global experience, resulting from work experiences in the United Kingdom, Germany, France, South Korea, and Canada, have provided insights into the unique challenges of competing internationally and of growing a company through international acquisitions. — — — — —

The applicant clearly understands how much INSEAD values global professional experience and displays fit by highlighting her exposure to international business.

Some of my strengths are inherent. My ability to read and comprehend information at a rapid pace began when I first started reading the newspaper's sports section at age 3. My calm demeanor has also been a constant in my life, allowing me to remain composed and positive in challenging situations. This translates into a strong personal presence, often noted by managers as making me seem older than my years.

Weaknesses

I also recognize my development needs. In pursuing the goal of owning a successful large venture capital firm, my prior focus on large corporations has limited my knowledge of how to start and manage a small business. By pursuing an MBA at INSEAD, I hope to increase my knowledge of small business financing and development.

From a skills perspective, I need to work on reigning in my strong perspectives. While being willing to debate a position is an attribute, at times I defend my point so strongly that I may miss the value in my opposition's argument. One of INSEAD's appeals is the opportunity to debate viewpoints with a group of incredibly intelligent people, learning from their experiences while sharing my own. — — — — —

The stated weaknesses align well with INSEAD's strengths.

I hope to be able to build upon my strengths and address my weaknesses over the next year at INSEAD, as I continue to live by the kaizen philosophy. — — — — —

Nice job of connecting the closing back to the opening.

Hobbies

Another way that b-schools sometimes try to find out more about you is by asking about activities in which you're involved outside of work. These questions provide you with a great opportunity to convey your interests outside the professional environment. You can use the opportunity to express one of the dimensions that wasn't as strongly articulated in other parts of your application.

Some examples of questions that fall into this type:

- ☐ *Outside of work I... (Northwestern—Kellogg)*
- ☐ *Please explain if you have been involved in charity/volunteer and/or entrepreneurial activities, giving examples of your involvement, the amount of time you gave to each activity and why you chose to get involved. (University of London—London Business School)*

Sample essay

People maybe surprised to learn that I... (USC—Marshall)

People maybe surprised to learn that I enjoy acting as a dance choreographer. I have found cultural dance to be an outlet that allows me to utilize innovation and imagination through graceful moves, balanced by synchronized music.

Over the last 10 years I have choreographed numerous folk dances for audiences of over 5,000 people. Each performance is significantly different. Two years ago, I choreographed a dance for 16 women. Each of us carried candles throughout the performance, adding effervescence to execution. The following year, I modified a traditional Swedish dance that manipulates pieces of ribbon on a central pole. As part of a grand finale act, I, along with 11 other participants, performed the ribbon dance in a manner that reflected a classic Norwegian drama. — — — —

Shows a combination of creativity and dedication.

In addition to the energy and creativity that is required by choreography, I also enjoy the teaching aspects of it. Teaching participants how to move with harmony and style are key to the successful implementation of any dance. It is satisfying to be able to not only see the participants learn the components of the dances, but also to watch them as they add their own personality to the movements. I will continue to choreograph dances, because it provides me with an avenue through which I can celebrate my culture, spirit, and life. — — — —

The applicant's interest in teaching certainly would benefit Marshall's active learning model. The applicant successfully raised that point during her interview.

Diversity

Diversity essays can be similar to personal philosophy essays in that they are asked in an attempt to find out how you are unique. However, diversity essays differ in that they will frequently ask how your uniqueness will contribute to the classroom.

It is important to understand that admissions committees have a broad definition of diversity, and that isn't limited to culture or ethnicity. Diversity is defined as unique experiences or background, so it applies to professional roles that you've played, perspectives that you have, hobbies in which you participate, topics that you've studied, and so on. Regardless of how you are unique, make sure to bring it out in response to this type of question in order to show that you have something different to bring to the classroom dynamic.

Some examples of questions that fall into this type:

- ❑ *Describe any meaningful cross-cultural experiences you have had that highlight your awareness, understanding, and appreciation of interacting with people from diverse backgrounds. How have these experiences influenced your interpersonal, communication, and team skills and your desire to pursue a management career? (Vanderbilt University—Owen)*

- ❑ *The Darden School seeks a diverse and unique entering class of future leaders. How will your distinctiveness enrich our learning environment and enhance your prospects for success as a leader? (University of Virginia—Darden)*
- ❑ *Describe how your skills, knowledge, and life experiences could benefit potential classmates. (Purdue University—Krannert)*
- ❑ *Fuqua's culture values the individual contributions that each student brings to the community. What qualities and life experiences will you bring to Fuqua, and how will they enable you to contribute? (Duke—Fuqua)*

Sample essay

Describe any experiences you've had that highlight the value of diversity in a business setting. (University of Michigan Business School)

Diversity of talents on the court

Over the course of my basketball-playing career, I have captained my high school and college varsity basketball teams, represented the state of California in a national invitational, and led the country in free-throw shooting accuracy. These individual successes came as a result of hard work, personal sacrifice, and commitment. However, as I matured as a person and leader, I recognized that these individual accomplishments meant nothing when compared to team victories and championships. I learned an early lesson in teamwork, and the potential for team success when a group of uniquely skilled individuals was well-managed and integrated appropriately. In looking back at our team successes, I realize our victories and championships could not have been accomplished without the collaborative efforts and diverse talents of those around me. — — — — —

The applicant does a nice job of setting the context of the essay by discussing his previous experience with the power of diversity and teamwork. He also is able to discuss some past accomplishments that might not have otherwise come out.

Diversity of talents off the court

Since beginning work, my lesson in diversity has logically translated to my life in the business world. Early in my career, I worked on a project with an information systems expert from mainland China and a business major from a small Midwest town. Although we made up a relatively small project team, each of us had very unique backgrounds and project experiences. These backgrounds and experiences contributed to individual strengths, as each of us led the portions of the project that most accurately aligned with these strengths. Additionally, due to the size of the team, we actively participated in all engagement stages, ultimately learning a great deal from each other. The project was an eventual success, and it helped to equip me better for future engagements in which I could maintain larger management responsibilities.

My current project team also exemplifies the value of diversity. From a cultural standpoint, my team has members from nine different countries. As each practitioner has gone through different educational and cultural experiences, they are able to bring a unique perspective in attacking project issues and creating business solutions. In a professional sense, my team is made up of practitioners with backgrounds in technology implementations, Oracle database design, business process, system testing, and user training. The complex technology and business aspects of the project require a constant interaction among these different professionals. There is no doubt that this effective integration of individual contributions has directly led to our successful project completion. — — — — —

These two paragraphs transition nicely into how diversity can be an asset in the professional environment.

In each of these engagements, my challenge as a leader and team member was to evaluate and capitalize on the diverse abilities within my team. I have benefited from these challenges, as I have been able to cultivate new functional expertise and business perspectives. However, in a much larger sense, these engagements were successful due to the diversity of talent that we maintained as a team. Although the merging of talent is sometimes challenging, the benefits achieved in effectively doing so can be as substantial as winning a team championship.

Looking ahead toward future growth

As I grow through personal and professional experiences, I have come to realize that diversity can be an extremely valuable part of a successful team. I look forward to the learning opportunities that will come with interacting with the unique students that make up UMBS, and will enjoy the challenge of merging our diverse perspectives as we grow into business leaders of the future. — — — — —

Nice closing The admissions committee gets the sense that the applicant understands the value of diversity and that he personally would have a lot to add to the diversity of UMBS.

Professional experience

With the large emphasis that b-schools place on work experience, it isn't surprising that a number of them have essays dedicated to discussing a professional accomplishment or experience. Admissions committees are interested in seeing how you perform in a professional environment and how you learn from work experiences. This is your opportunity to display innovation, leadership, and teamwork abilities, so take advantage of it.

Some examples of questions that fall into this type:

- ☐ *List one of your most significant professional or organizational accomplishments. Describe your precise role in this event and how it has helped to shape your management skills. (Emory University—Goizueta)*
- ☐ *Describe the most significant lesson you have learned in your full-time*

employment and how this influenced your personal development and career aspirations. (University of Western Ontario—Ivey)

- ❑ *Discuss three professional accomplishments which demonstrate your potential for a successful managerial career. (University of Rochester—Simon)*
- ❑ *What is the most significant change or improvement you have made to an organization with which you have recently been affiliated? Describe the process you went through to identify the need for change and manage the process of implementing change. What were the results? (Indiana University—Kelley)*

Sample essay

Describe your professional work experience since earning your bachelor's degree and discuss how you chose your career path. (Duke University—Fuqua)

After graduating from Coggins University with a Bachelor's degree in business, I took a job with Gardner Technologies, a company that sells data analysis tools for large businesses. All new Gardner employees must pass an intensive six week database "boot camp," and I came away from my training with a deep understanding of database technology and an appreciation for how it can be used in business. My specific interest was in the intersection of technology and marketing, and in my first year at the company I further familiarized myself with database technology while I served in a corporate marketing role. — — —

Succinct statement of professional interests. Shows the rationale behind decisions that the applicant makes later on in his career.

I developed and executed marketing campaigns with the company's partners and represented the company at industry events. Over time I took a greater interest in how the company was marketing its individual products, and I was able to pursue this interest by working with the product management team to develop a marketing plan for each of the company's four main product lines.

During this time, I reported to the vice president of marketing. After my first year, he asked me to join a newly formed group, Marketing Technology Solutions (TSM). TSM's goal was to develop deep expertise in each industry that Gardner served, including Healthcare, Telecommunications, and Finance. The group's role quickly turned into a strict business development function as we pursued large e-commerce deals with a handful of prospective partners. It was an exciting opportunity for a 23-year-old because we were negotiating deals worth over \$10 million each. However, I found that I was drifting away from the application of technology in marketing, and I wanted to reverse that trend. — — —

Nice example that shows the reader that the applicant had a significant level of responsibility even in the early period of his career.

That's when the opportunity at The Source presented itself. The Source operates one of the most popular personal finance

and investing sites on the Internet (FinSource.com). Most of the Website was free when I joined in 1999, but the company did sell some products on the site, mainly investing books and stock research reports. I was hired into the product management group to improve how we marketed our products to our users and to turn more of them into paying customers. It was a great opportunity in that the company's large database of users allowed me to put my database skills to use. — — — — —

The last sentence of this paragraph shows that the applicant searches for background fit in making career decisions. This is subtle, but important to the admissions committee.

In my first year, my team had some great successes, including improving our promotion conversion rates by 50 percent through the use of new database targeting techniques. We also introduced a successful new line of online seminars that teach paying customers about a range of personal finance topics. My most satisfying personal accomplishment was leading the market research for and launch of a new investment newsletter, which is now our most profitable premium service.

Earlier this year, I was promoted to the role of senior marketing manager, and I now report to the company's vice president of marketing. With the title have come new responsibilities, including the goal of generating \$2.3 million in revenue for our existing products, and leading the marketing launch of a new financial advisory service that is expected to generate \$5 million in its first year. I am currently the only person in the company without an MBA who has revenue-generating responsibility. — — — — —

Great details provided in these two paragraphs.

It's a challenging role, especially because we are like many "dot-coms" and have had to figure out how to reach our goals with a reduced staff. Even more importantly, I don't have any direct reports and must therefore manage people in other departments through indirect influence. Over the last two years, I have learned how to influence and cooperate with others to get things done, learning a great deal about leadership and teamwork in the process. I have found this aspect of my professional development to be most rewarding, and I plan on further developing these skills at Fuqua and in my future career. — — — — —

The last paragraph serves as a nice summary. The applicant does an excellent job of relating his professional experience to Fuqua's strengths.

Failure

Similar to essays on ethics, many applicants struggle in coming up with responses to these types of questions. Failure essays will typically ask you to describe a situation in which you did not meet an objective or you made a mistake. Applicants often wonder if they should actually write about a true lapse in judgment, or simply disguise an accomplishment and call it a "failure."

What admissions committees are really looking for here is how you learn from your mistakes. They want to hear about a situation in which you truly did fail, not a cloaked accomplishment. This is another essay type that lends itself to the SAR framework. The difference here is that you should focus a majority of the essay on the “Results” section, telling the admissions committee how this experience has impacted your outlook. To a certain extent, the greater the failure, the more learning you can discuss. That’s not to say that you should reveal some sort of fatal flaw, such as a tendency toward criminal behavior, but admissions counselors know that we’ve all “messed up big time.” This essay is really one in which you should discuss such an event, and more importantly discuss what you learned and the steps you’ve taken to ensure that it won’t happen again.

Some examples of questions that fall into this type:

- ❑ *Describe a failure or setback in your life. How did you overcome this setback? What, if anything, would you do differently if confronted with this situation again?* (University of Michigan Business School)
- ❑ *Recognizing that successful leaders are able to learn from failure, discuss a situation in which you failed and what you learned.* (Harvard Business School)

Sample essay

Describe a situation taken from school, business, civil, or military life, where you did not meet your personal objectives, and discuss briefly the effect. (INSEAD)

It’s one thing to fail to meet your objectives in the business world, but quite another to fail to meet them while serving in the military. In the business world not meeting personal objectives could mean revenue goals are not met, a transaction falls through, or in a worst-case scenario that colleagues lose their jobs. In the military, however, not meeting personal objectives could mean that people lose their lives. The magnitude of that difference translated into a powerful learning from an unfortunate experience. — — — — —

This opening paragraph sets the tone for the situation and certainly makes the reader realize that the discussions that follow will not be trivial.

When a military coup ousted an inspection team to prevent the discovery of weapons of mass destruction, I went to Eastern Europe to plan subsequent air strikes. Despite my personal objectives to exceed the expectations of my senior officers, I made a colossal mistake on my first assignment. — — — — —

Very succinct explanation of the situation, which allows the applicant to quickly get to the other parts of the essay.

I was charged with investigating the appropriate approach to taking out a bunker that housed some of the illegal weaponry uncovered by the inspection team. Eager to prove myself in a new environment and uncomfortable asking for assistance, I went to work. Using modeling software, I created a blast pattern to depict the strikes’ destructive radius. Simply following the step-by-step training that I received, I did not acknowledge

the fact that this pattern partially covered a nearby building. This was a glaring error that became evident later that night.

Standing before tense pilots, my briefing lasted 30 seconds before whispers grew into an agitated roar. The senior officer leading the strike proceeded to “dress me down,” pointing out that the structure alongside the bunker was housing for the coup’s families. The strike approach that I chose would have easily damaged this building, injuring or even killing civilians in the process. Because my training had never accounted for this sort of risk, I never considered threats to non-military structures. My inexperience and narrow reliance on procedure almost cost innocent lives. Because our jets were about to launch, the assault on the bunk was eliminated. — — — — —

The imagery in this paragraph is very effective.

I was relegated to observer status for my remaining week on site, making the lesson stick, and turning me into a better officer and person. I learned that computers and procedures are simply tools, but teamwork and inter-personal communication lead to real understanding. By performing my analysis alone rather than engaging the experts around me, I hampered the mission. Furthermore, I learned that by asking questions of the people around me I can gain access to a wealth of information that otherwise remains underutilized. Six months later, when I ran my own team in Bosnia, I turned these realizations into meaningful action by instituting information sharing in a formalized manner.

The applicant does a nice job in these two paragraphs of covering what he learned as a result of the experience. Additionally, he touches upon how he’s focused on building skills for which the admissions committee looks. Finally, his closing is very effective in that it ties back to the first paragraph.

Ironically enough, despite the magnitude of difference in impact, these are all lessons that easily translate back into the business environment and that I certainly intend to employ as I switch careers. — — — — —

Additional information

In addition to the 10 main types of essays, most schools also allow applicants to respond to an optional “catchall” essay that basically asks whether there is any additional information that the applicant would like to share with the admissions committee. Most applicants who respond to this essay abuse it by either pasting in an essay written for another school or by simply writing about every topic that comes to mind. Neither of these approaches matches this essay’s purpose.

The purpose of the essay is to allow applicants to discuss any evaluation criterion for which they might appear to be an outlier. The essay allows the applicant to attack the glaring weakness head on and provide additional information as to why it really isn’t a weakness, or how the applicant is addressing the weakness. Good reasons for using this essay include addressing a GMAT that falls below the school’s 80 percent mark, pointing out that you worked 30 hours a week to pay for your undergrad tuition (which affected your GPA) or explaining some other extraordinary circumstance.

If, however, there is no exceptional aspect of your candidacy that hasn't already been addressed in some other aspect of the application, then it would be in your best interest to skip this essay.

Some examples of questions that fall into this type:

- ❑ *Is there anything else about your background you think we should know as we evaluate your application? If you believe your credentials and essays represent you fairly, you shouldn't feel obligated to answer this question.* (Indiana University—Kelley)
- ❑ *Please provide additional information about whatever else you would like the Admissions Committee to know.* (MIT-Sloan)

Sample essay

Please use this opportunity to present any additional information that would assist the Admissions Committee in the evaluation of your candidacy. (University of Virginia—Darden)

The failure of regression analysis

My favorite aspect of regression analysis has always been the “outliers.” These anomalies defy logic by refusing to conform to their destiny, outlined by defined variables.

Over the years, standardized tests have been touted for their ability to predict academic and career success. Several econometric analyses have been created to support these contentions. For every one of these models, however, there are a few instances in which the predicted result of low standardized test scores deviates from the line. I am the deviation. — — — — —

This applicant takes an unconventional approach to this essay type by referencing an analytical tool. In doing so, he's able to show off his strength in an area of perceived weakness and also subtly present a potent argument for looking past what otherwise would have been a “game-breaking” GMAT score. It turned out to be a “game-winning” approach.

The GMAT experience

The disappointment I felt when I pressed the “enter” button and saw my 550 GMAT score flash across the screen is indescribable. How could I receive such a low score after months and months of tireless study? The fact that it was my third attempt at the exam made the failure all the more painful.

Still, my experience with the GMAT exam is reflective of my history with standardized tests. Throughout high school and college, I have always underperformed on these exams. I have learned that my “standardized test anxiety” does not have to limit my academic or career success; rather I use these “failures” as motivating factors to succeed inside and outside the classroom. — — — — —

The applicant is very effective in setting the stage for a deeper argument as to why his GMAT score does not accurately reflect his abilities.

The experience of an outlier

Throughout my undergraduate career, I was able to balance a rigorous course load in the business engineering (BE) program and multiple extracurricular activities. Earning a 3.87 GPA in the BE program allowed me to gain a strong foundation in business operations, procurement, and logistics. The BE program at Kuziev University was recently ranked as the second best program in the nation and focuses on the student's ability to apply quantitative analysis to business case scenarios.

Early success in quantitative courses such as Economics and Applied Calculus allowed me to serve as a tutor for three of my four years. As a tutor, I trained students in fundamental mathematic and economic concepts, through review sessions and challenging practice examinations. Building upon my tutoring experience, I developed a new academic coaching program within the College of Engineering. The coaching program allowed me to assist over 70 students through resume and networking workshops, test-taking strategy sessions, and time management analysis. In recognition of stellar academic performance and my representation of the College of Business, I was named as Kuziev University's "Most Outstanding Business Student" for the graduating class of 1998.

The applicant shows that he clearly has the academic background and quantitative ability to succeed in an MBA program.

These victories did not, however, preclude my attempts to succeed on the GMAT examination. In fact, I modified my approach to the exam several times, dedicated over a year to studying, and even worked with a tutor for a four-month period. Taking over 20 practice exams and mastering more than 4,000 practice problems, I tried to push beyond my standardized test anxiety and surpass my historical performances. I certainly feel that I have a good grasp of the exam material, as I consistently score in the high 600s on practice exams.

This paragraph demonstrates that the applicant has given the GMAT his all and that he didn't merely take the GMAT one time without preparing.

Although I fell short in this area, my "failure" only further motivates me to prove that I am the exception to the rule. I continue to manage these "failures," because I refuse to be defined by them. Indeed I succeed in spite of them, as I am an aberration. I am the outlier.

Great closing. The last sentence connects well with the introduction.

Final thoughts on essays

There's no doubt that your essays will be your greatest point of differentiation from the rest of the applicant pool. It's incredibly important, therefore, that you are able to write your story in the most effective manner possible. Again, Chapter 6 will help with the assembly of the full game plan package.

Here are a few last tips that should help you put together the best essays possible:

- ❑ **Make edits to your essays in several rounds.** You will constantly make revisions to your essays as you find better ways to express yourself and different methods for highlighting your attributes. As such, you should look at essay writing as an repetitive process that ultimately results in a masterpiece. You should never submit an essay with which you are unsatisfied.
- ❑ **When you are done with your essays, set them aside for a of couple days before submitting them.** Sometimes applicants get caught up in the writing and editing process and simply want to get the essays out the door as soon as possible so that they can check that task off the list. This mentality is certainly understandable, but can be detrimental as in many cases it leads to essays that have been rushed. By leaving completed essays alone for a couple of days, you will be able to read them with a fresh perspective, and will most likely be able to evaluate them better.
- ❑ **If possible, provide your recommenders with a sample essay.** In addition to providing your game plan to your recommenders, consider giving them a sample essay that discusses your career goals. This will bring out some details of your story that they are less likely to have a handle on, and will help create an application with messages that are fully aligned.

Recommendations

If your essays are the most important embodiment of the core messages that you want to communicate, then your recommendations are a close second. There is no more powerful way to reinforce the image that you're trying to present to an admissions committee than by having a former supervisor or coworker corroborate it. Think of each recommender as a character witness who is ready to illustrate your strengths with unique examples from your past. Just as in a court case, you can't afford to have a witness who is lukewarm. Your recommenders need to exude passion about you as a person, confidence about your career potential and your ability to succeed at business school.

Most schools ask for two or three recommendations, with a few asking for just one. Some leave open the option of submitting an additional recommendation. Consider this extra recommendation *only* if it would add something new to your application story. If your first two recommenders tell the admissions committee that you're a great team player, then you don't need a third person telling them that, too. If you do have one recommender in mind who has seen strengths of yours that no one else has seen, though, then adding that extra letter to your application will certainly help.

Who should write your recommendations?

More than anything, your recommenders need to know you well. You may be able to get a letter from your Executive Vice President and CEO, but if they haven't worked with you much, it will be very apparent in your recommendations. Admissions officers evaluate a recommendation based on its content much more than on the name signed at the bottom of the letter, so keep that in mind.

Also, in an attempt to provide variety, choose recommenders who can give examples covering a wide range of work experiences. If your boss will be most able to cite examples of your leadership abilities, then get your second recommendation from a coworker who has seen how well you work in teams. Ideally, each recommendation that you submit will present a well-rounded picture of you. But it is acceptable to have recommendations that each emphasize a particular dimension, if each of your recommenders has mostly seen you perform in certain types of situations.

Most schools want at least one of your recommendations to come from your immediate supervisor. This person should know you best in terms of your working style, your ambitions, and your strengths and weaknesses. If your current supervisor doesn't know you particularly well (perhaps you've just moved into your current role), then make sure to also get a recommendation from the person who knows you and your capabilities best.

Of course, it may be possible that you don't want your boss to know that you are applying to business school. This is fairly common, especially in disciplines outside of the traditional "feeder" industries of consulting and investment banking. Schools understand this, and most have a provision stating, "If you cannot get a recommendation from your supervisor, please attach a note explaining why." In this case, consider approaching a former boss (within your company or in a past job) or someone else with whom you have worked closely. Admissions officers prefer to hear from someone who supervised you or someone who was above you on the organizational chart, so start with those people first. The recommender needs to be more than a buddy, but a colleague who has seen you in a variety of situations can still write a good recommendation if he can provide strong examples of your leadership abilities, teamwork skills, etc.

A few schools also ask for a recommendation from a professor or advisor from your undergraduate school. In general, unless a school asks for a recommendation from an academic source, concentrate on just professional recommendations. The one exception is if you had an exceptional achievement in college that will bolster one of your application dimensions (something more than great grades or run-of-the-mill lab work). If this is the case, a recommendation from this source is worth the effort, particularly if it can emphasize any leadership traits or maturity that you haven't been able to express as much in the office.

What should they say?

Your recommendations should support the position you establish for yourself in your other application components. They should add depth to this position by citing examples that go beyond what you cover in your own essays.

Start with the grid that you built for yourself in Chapter 2. Odds are that you covered many of the Xs in your essays and data sheet, but not all of them. Your recommenders can help cover more of these examples, most often the ones pertaining to professional experience. Each example that they bring up will ideally complement what you have said about yourself in the rest of the application. A little bit of redundancy isn't damaging, but you need to make sure that your recommendations aren't simply rehashing what you have already said about yourself.

As for how they deliver the message, the advice that applies to your essays applies here as well. As the old writer's adage goes, "Show, don't tell." It is far more powerful for a recommendation to illustrate your abilities by describing concrete examples than to simply say that you are a good leader, strong analytical thinker, etc. The stories of what you did in specific situations are what admissions officers are looking for. Next we will discuss how you can arm your recommenders with the stories they can use as support for their opinions of you.

How can you make sure they're saying the right things?

Ah yes, the time-honored question. How much coaching is too much, and what do you do if you're afraid that your manager can't write an effective recommendation? It depends on several issues.

First, the ethics of the matter. Everyone would agree (we hope) that you shouldn't write your own recommendations. Outside of the ethical reason not to write your own recommendation, chances are that you'll struggle to write a letter as well as a good recommender would. We've found that recommenders come up with examples that we've long since forgotten. Also, avoiding the self-written recommendation allows you to avoid the "how positive sounds too positive?" dilemma. As such, we think it's best when the recommendation is in your recommender's own words. But what if your boss says, "I'm too busy. You can go ahead and put it together and I'll be happy to sign it," leaving you to write it on your own? One option is to simply find another recommender, but odds are that you picked that person for a reason. Your other option is to try to make the process as easy as possible, and you can do that by providing the recommender with substantial background information.

Next, it's a question of how comfortable you are coaching your recommenders. Again, it needs to be written in their words, but you can help your chances a lot by at least suggesting some stories from your work history that can illustrate your key application dimensions. Even better, create a game plan, as shown in Chapter 6, and provide that to your recommenders. Also, try to provide them with a sample essay or two that provides additional details on your career goals. Review the plan with them and discuss how important the recommendation process is. In those discussions you will inevitably end up doing a lot of self-promotion, so take some time now to get comfortable with the fact that you will be tooting your own horn, or at least asking others to toot it for you. It can also be helpful to provide your recommenders with a sample recommendation, such as the one shown below, to give them an idea of the level of quality that you are expecting.

You can decide for yourself how much detail you want to include in the game plan you share with your recommenders. The idea is to give each recommender enough information so that she can make a statement about you and then back it up with a short, illustrative story. Ideally, you will give each recommender a different set of stories, so that you don't have three people all writing about the same things. This requires some extra coordination on your part, but is an important step to ensure that each recommendation adds something new (and that they don't all sound like they were written from the same template).

Of course, if you find that you can't provide multiple types of stories to each recommender, that's okay. As mentioned above, not every recommendation needs to sell 100 percent of your skills; it is most important that your recommendations all work together to present a complete picture of you as a well-rounded applicant. So, if one really stresses your teamwork skills and one puts more emphasis on your leadership skills, that's fine. Of course, you may never see what each of your recommenders writes, but you can definitely influence their output by carefully controlling the inputs that you give them.

Sample recommendation

The following is a sample recommendation that includes typical questions found on numerous applications. Note the recommender's style, as she illustrates the applicant's strengths and doesn't merely state them. We've highlighted the aspects of this recommendation that we feel are especially strong.

Top Business School Recommendation

Dear Members of the Admissions Committee:

I have had the pleasure of working with Shannan on several projects over the last 20 months, both directly as a Project Manager, and indirectly as a member of Kramer-Dover Consulting's Outsourcing Business Unit. I have had the opportunity to get to know Shannan both professionally and personally, and I believe that I can fully evaluate and recommend Shannan for enrollment at Top Business School.

I am a Project Manager in the San Francisco office of Kramer-Dover, having worked here for 12 years. I have seen many professionals over that time frame, and Shannan is clearly one of the best I have ever seen. This is no small accomplishment as Kramer-Dover hires only the best and brightest people, and Shannan is consistently in the top 15 percent of that group of people in terms of professional capabilities. In addition, she rounds out her professional expertise with many personal activities and pursuits. Consequently, the phrase that comes to mind when I think of Shannan is "Renaissance Woman."

Shannan would be a great asset to Top Business School and any future employer. Specific answers to your standard questions are included below. — — — — —

Sincerely,

Cindy D. Peterson

Project Manager

Kramer-Dover Consulting

The introduction letter to the recommendation adds a professional touch and allows the recommender to summarize her thoughts before answering the specific questions.

1. Define your relationship to the applicant and describe the circumstances under which you have known him or her.

I first met Shannan on a project we worked on together at a telecommunications client approximately 20 months ago. As a firm, we had just begun to develop a new Outsourcing Business Unit. The first project that Shannan and I completed was the first engagement of its kind for our firm, and we believe one of the first of its kind for anyone in the industry.

I was the Project Manager on this engagement, responsible for the success and deliverables to the client for the project. Shannan was a lead consultant, reporting directly to a manager who reported to me. This engagement lasted approximately four months. During this time, Shannan and I had daily interaction in developing the methodology and deliverables associated with this new Business Unit. Because of the complexity and uncertainty of determining how this methodology applied to our client, there were numerous late night meetings and discussions that we used to refine our approach and thought process.

Over the next eight months, as I moved on to another client, my interaction with Shannan was less frequent. Our contact was mainly during meetings when our Business Unit professionals met to further our thinking and better develop our deliverables that we used at our clients. Shannan took a lead role in helping develop many of our tools, which I subsequently used for other clients. At one time, I had Shannan come to my client site for a few weeks to help “kick-start” our engagement by training other consultants on our tools. The client was so impressed by Shannan’s expertise that he begged me to place her on the project. Shannan continued to play an advisory role and we completed the project in record time. The client was able to reduce operational costs by more than \$100 million, due in large part to Shannan.

For the past eight months, Shannan has been reporting directly to me in another Outsourcing engagement at another large telecommunications client. We interact several times a day due to the complexity and sensitivity of the client and Shannan’s key leadership role on the team.

2. What do you consider the applicant’s primary talents or strengths?

I believe that Shannan has several significant strengths that enable her to be successful as a consultant. A few of her exceptional strengths include:

- ☐ **Leadership:** *Shannan has the unique quality of commanding respect from her peers, clients, and leaders.*

Although Shannan would be considered a junior member of the team in her current assignment based on age or years of experience, she became the leader of the team. This was due to her grasp of the details, with the foresight of being able to articulate the activities required to complete the project successfully.

- ❑ **Client Relationship:** *Our current engagement started as a small assignment with a minimal span of influence. Largely due to the development of solid relationships with our client, we were able to create a significant role with the client in one of its key strategic areas. Shannan played a major role in developing that relationship. There was actually a time when I was telling the client to hire a less expensive consulting firm, and they refused because they trusted and believed in our consultants, namely Shannan.*

The recommender does a good job of giving a specific example of how Shannan's relationship with the client played a crucial role in the success of the project.

- ❑ **Teamwork:** *Shannan is everyone's favorite consultant to ask questions of. Many consultants and clients refer to her on a wide range of issues including finance, industry information, regulatory interpretation, and consulting tools. Everyone feels comfortable going to her, because she is very approachable, friendly, articulate, knowledgeable, and goes out of her way to help.*

These bullet points really highlight Shannan's strengths and position her as a leader who is great to work with and for.

3. What do you consider the applicant's weaknesses or developmental needs?

Shannan's development needs revolve around gaining more high-level experience in the consulting profession. These types of experiences include:

- ❑ *Conducting formal performance reviews and career development discussions with subordinates within the firm.*
- ❑ *Having a significant role in the selling of our professional services to our clients.*
- ❑ *Developing a broad base of client roles, relationships, and engagement experiences.*
- ❑ *Presenting in more formal settings to high-level client or firm leadership.*

4. What did you like best about working side-by-side with the candidate?

Shannan is a very well-rounded individual, professionally and personally, which makes working with her enjoyable. She is not one-dimensional, and always has some insight or anecdote to share with a team. She epitomizes Kramer-Dover's core attributes of integrity, teamwork, flexibility, leadership, reliability, and professionalism.

Outside of her demonstrated professional capabilities, one aspect of Shannan's character that greatly impresses me is how she is just all-around a great person—a "Renaissance Woman." On top of her professional talent (and related time commitment), Shannan still finds time to be a Big Sister through the Big Brothers Big Sisters Program. This is a relationship that she has developed over several years, not a "try it and see if I like it" kind of relationship. Shannan is also active in fund-raising and recruiting at her undergraduate alma mater. — — — — —

This section demonstrates Shannan's desire to get involved with the community and her initiative. The school's takeaway is that Shannan is multi-dimensional.

5. Comment on the applicant's personal integrity.

I rate a person's integrity and behavior based on how their peers and clients perceive them. Shannan has an enormous amount of respect. People enjoy being around her. They can "bank" on her answers to their questions as being accurate. Shannan conducts herself in a very professional manner under very stressful conditions. She is a role model for new consultants in our firm. I trust Shannan to perform with the utmost integrity and accountability in all aspects of her profession.

6. Please discuss observations you have made concerning the applicant's leadership abilities, team, and/or group skills.

I believe the largest change in Shannan over the past 20 months is the growth she has exhibited in the leadership area. When I first worked with Shannan, she was very effective at doing what she was told. Now, she clearly goes beyond performing tasks and seeks out ways to increase the performance of the entire team, not only her own work. Shannan is the leader of the team, and also shows an active interest in several of the other teams by inserting herself in areas that she can help to resolve issues, answer questions, and overall contribute to their progress.

7. What impact has this person had on the organization in which he or she works?

Shannan has had a major impact on Kramer-Dover. On an individual level she has been responsible for generating well over \$25 million for the firm. From a client perspective, she has been directly responsible for improving profitability by almost \$250 million. When you take into consideration how much she has trained internal employees and external staff in addition to the benefits of having her in a team environment, Shannan is responsible for having an even much greater impact.

Additionally, Shannan has helped create a lot of internal interest for the telecommunications industry in general and specifically our Outsourcing Business Unit. Although I am not part of her region, it is my sense that Shannan is very popular within

her peer group. I receive many phone calls from consultants in her region who would love to be part of our projects. We have been able to staff some of those consultants in large part due to Shannan's influence. Her presence is a signal to others that it must be interesting to work on our engagements. This impact has resulted in large growth in terms of the number of projects we sell in addition to the number of consultants we have been able to staff.

8. What will this individual be doing in 10 years? Why?

I'm not even sure what I'll be doing in 10 years, but my guess is that Shannan will be a successful partner in our firm. She has indicated to me that she would like to come back to our firm post-graduation and practice in our growing Mergers and Acquisitions Business Unit, focusing on the telecommunications industry. She enjoys the challenge that consulting brings, and possesses all of the major attributes required to be successful. I'm convinced that she will not only be a partner, but a global leader within our firm. I'm convinced of this because Shannan has been successful in everything she has been determined to do. — — — — —

The game plan that Shannan provided to her recommenders helped make sure that this message aligned with her essays on career goals.

9. If you have additional comments that you think would assist the Admissions Committee in making this decision, please add them here.

Shannan is the best all-around consultant I've had the opportunity to work with. She has become an invaluable resource to numerous employees in our firm, and to our clients. She has managed to do outstanding work in our difficult working environment through the use of her leadership, teamwork, analytical, personal, social, and all-around consulting skills. She has managed to meet the ultimate professional challenge—earn respect through outstanding professional effort and achieve outstanding results. She has also become a personal friend whom I trust and hold in high regard. I believe Shannan would become a welcome addition to Top Business School. — — — — —

Strong closing that again touches upon Shannan's main strengths.

Logistics

This mostly boils down to one concept: Give your recommenders enough time to do their thing! You should plan on giving each recommender at least two months to go from start to a finished recommendation. Right about now you may be asking, "But what if I don't have two months?" If that's the case, then start immediately, but realize that you may already be making tradeoffs in terms of recommendation quality. Just like essays, very few great recommendations are written overnight. Even if you're particularly close with someone and think that you can get a week's turnaround from him, you still risk getting a rushed recommendation. Unfortunately, the admissions committee

will likely translate this into either you being disorganized or your recommender not particularly caring about whether or not you get in (which also reflects badly on you). Ideally, your recommender will have enough time to digest your game plan, write her piece, let it sit for at least a few days, then revisit it and make improvements where needed—again, very similar to the essay-writing process.

Also, make sure that you know what your recommenders need to do once they're done writing their letters. Some schools ask that the recommenders submit the letters via mail by themselves, some ask that they submit them online, and others want you to send them with the rest of your completed application. Again, build enough time into your planning to account for this “back-end” part of the process. If a recommender fails to get her letter to the school in time, the admissions committee will consider it to be your fault.

Some of your recommenders may want to write a single letter that you can use for multiple schools. While most schools' recommendation forms are quite similar, there are enough subtle differences that you should try to avoid this as much as possible. Some schools (Stanford is one example) expressly discourage this practice. If a really valuable recommender insists that she can't write you multiple recommendations, make sure to start by getting a recommendation for your most selective school, and then weigh the benefits of recycling that recommendation for another school versus getting an entirely new letter for a different school. Again, you should think about your recommendations in totality. So, if you already have a strong, specific recommendation for a particular school, then having a second one that is somewhat recycled is more acceptable. This is another reason to limit the number of schools that you target. Naturally, as this number grows it becomes more difficult to receive a letter that is written specifically for each school. In general, you should avoid asking a potential recommender to complete more than three recommendations. This will help ensure that you receive specific responses for each recommendation.

Overall, we advise erring on the side of choosing recommendations that were written specifically for a given school. But this isn't always feasible, so you can afford to get some mileage out of an existing recommendation if you feel that it still adds something to your application that your other recommendations don't, and that it actually answers the questions that the admissions committee asks (which is obviously important!). If you can't get specific recommendations written, ask your recommenders to write a single recommendation that covers all of the questions for which your target schools ask.

Resume

In many ways, preparing a resume or curriculum vitae for your b-school applications seems redundant. After all, you are already required to report your employment history in the data sheets and expound on your professional experiences and career goals in the essays. So what's the point of requiring the resume? For one, the resume summarizes your background into one page. This allows the admissions committee to get a high-level understanding of where you're coming from and what you've accomplished. Secondly, your resume will often be the only reference point that your admissions interviewer has on you. For those two reasons, it's important that you

prepare a resume that reflects your story from both a background and a career goals standpoint.

Format

We suggest that you follow the standard one-page, reverse-chronological order format. Producing a resume that is longer than one page shows an inability to state concisely the important aspects of your background. Given the fact that admissions representatives probably won't spend much more than two minutes reviewing your resume, your goal should be to make your points succinct yet effective. Writing your resume in reverse chronological order allows you to display your progress over time. Additionally, the admissions representative will probably spend the majority of her time concentrating on the top of your resume, so you want your best stuff to come across first.

One way that you can make sure that your format fits well with your target schools is by using your target schools' formats in creating your resume. Many business schools have standard formats that their students are required to follow. Using those formats can be a simple way to show that you've done some due diligence on the school and ensure that your format works. You should be able to gain access to a school's format through a friend, colleague, or a quick search on *www.google.com*. Going with a business school's standard format gives you the added benefit of having a pre-formatted baseline resume from which you can work once you start classes.

In general though, your resume should consist of three sections: education, experience, and additional. The commonly followed rule is that if you are coming out of school, you should place the education section first, but in other cases, the experience section should be placed first. The placement of one in front of the other is supposed to reflect their level of relative importance based on where you are in your career. In terms of business school admissions, your academic background is just as important as your professional background, so you have some flexibility here in terms of placement. If you follow a business school's format, then the education section will almost certainly come first.

Content

It's easy to get wrapped up in figuring out what format you want to use for the resume, but don't let that overshadow the more important task of creating your resume's content. As much as possible, you should try to make sure that your resume reflects the four dimensions: innovation, maturity, leadership, and teamwork. You should also make sure that progression in responsibility and achievements are highlighted. Finally, it should be clear that your career goals are achievable in light of your background, and that the target school is a good place for you to develop the skills you need to achieve those goals. This means emphasizing the experiences that are relevant to your career goals and deemphasizing those that are not.

In covering your experiences, you should focus on your actions and their result, not on your job descriptions. Provide tangible figures as much as possible. This is probably the biggest mistake that applicants make in regard to the resume. They make subjective

statements, such as “Interfaced with Sales and Marketing in order to evaluate product potential.” This statement is of little value to the resume reviewer and basically just takes up space. Your focus should be on providing the reviewer with hard numbers, so that she can see how your actions translate into success. Let’s take another look at how this statement could be phrased: “Worked with seven members of Sales and Marketing in evaluating a new product with \$125 million revenue potential. Evaluation led to eventual launch and 35 percent market share.” Certainly this approach takes up more room, but it is more effective than wasting space with esoteric statements about your contributions.

To serve as an example, consider the case of a fictitious applicant named Stephen Pearson. Stephen’s career goal is to work for a venture capital firm, focusing on high-tech investments. Take a look at Stephen’s resume and pay particular attention to how he focuses on actions and results. His resume certainly isn’t perfect, but it does do a nice job of touching on each of the four dimensions while showing fit with his career goals. We’ve added some commentary to stress the aspects of the resume that we feel are truly solid.

STEPHEN PEARSON

2220 Tenth Street, Apt. 320

New York, NY 10027

(212) 555-1234

spearson@coldmail.com

EDUCATION

CARELLA UNIVERSITY

Washington D.C. May 1999

Bachelor of Arts degree in Mathematics and Economics, Honors

- ☐ Honors thesis in Economics.
- ☐ Elected Economics Student Association Representative.
- ☐ Co-Founder of student investment fund.
- ☐ Co-Chaired Big Brother/Big Sister Program. — — — — —

Stephen immediately comes across as someone who is intelligent, well-liked, willing to get involved, and takes initiative.

CHARTERED FINANCIAL ANALYST (CANDIDATE)

Passed all three levels of CFA exam and completed 18 of 36 months investment-related work experience.— — — — —

Don't hesitate to show accomplishments that are in progress. For example, if you are learning a new language, taking a statistics course, or participating in a public speaking class, try and mention it somewhere.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

EISENBERG WEXLER-MERGERS & ACQUISITIONS GROUP

New York, NY

Associate

2001-2003

Constructed more than 100 financial models including discounted cash flow, comparable company and accretion/dilution analyses. Evaluated more than \$4.5 billion potential

transactions including leveraged buyouts, acquisitions, and spin-offs. Worked with more than 10 advisory teams composed of company executives, attorneys, investment bankers, and accountants. Received highest rating among the associate class.

Nice summary. Shows Stephen's ability to stand out even in a highly-competitive environment.

- ❑ Lead associate in the \$145 million leveraged buyout of Stapleton International, manufacturer of semi-conductors.
- ❑ Structured the \$900 million sale of Seeber Trust, software development company. Conducted benchmark, competitor, and valuation analyses, assisted in bid evaluation, and oversaw auction processes. Led due diligence process, which included more than 75 hours of dedicated company analysis.
- ❑ Researched more than 40 companies in the high-technology sector to identify potential clients whose combined market capitalization was over \$70 billion. Led more than 20 meetings with clients to discuss financing needs and strategic objectives.
- ❑ Assisted in business development efforts, including the hosting of M&A seminars that more than 150 executives attended and resulted in more than \$75 million in business.
- ❑ Created financing strategy and raised more than \$70 million for Schudmak Incorporated through debt and equity offerings.
- ❑ Developed training materials and oversaw training of 35 new analysts and summer MBA associates.

Displays deep industry knowledge that certainly would be used in his desired career.

Shows willingness to perform "extracurricular" activities and an ability to work with others.

SANNI MUTUAL FUNDS

High-Yield Bond Analyst

**San Francisco, CA
1999-2001**

- ❑ Researched high-tech and aerospace industries to determine trends and develop outlook on industry opportunities and threats.
- ❑ Made buy/hold/sell recommendations to portfolio managers for \$150 million in industry holdings based on industry outlook and analysis of the underlying companies' financial information and business strategies.
- ❑ Analyzed Japanese economy, specifically banking industry, and recommended the sale of \$30 million of Japanese bank preferred shares 10 months prior to Japanese sovereign credit downgrade by rating services.

Management Trainee

- ❑ Supervised a diverse department of 35 employees, mostly 1st and 2nd generation Americans from 7 countries.

WALLER SECURITIES

Washington, D.C.
Summer 1998

Brokerage Intern

- ❑ Created a database that segmented 45 brokers' accounts according to sales potential.
- ❑ Completed the Series 7 exam and received license to buy and sell financial securities.

Displays fit with future career goals and profession from here to the point he achieves CFA status.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- ❑ Languages: Conversant in Spanish, working toward fluency.
- ❑ Community: Teach economics through Junior Achievement to a 27-student class and helped establish two new Junior Achievement programs in the local community.
- ❑ Hobbies: Traveling, personal investing, golf, chess, deep sea diving.

Language capabilities are always an added bonus.

Nice job of showing community involvement. He doesn't simply list community service activities.

Shows he has a life outside of work.

The Admissions Consultant Question

It's a question that many business school applicants ask at some point in the process: "Should I spend a couple of thousand dollars on an admissions consulting service?" No matter how excellent your experiences are or how sharp your story is, the intimidating odds of getting into the top schools means that this question will likely cross your mind somewhere along the way. The short answer is...it depends.

First, let's look at what an admission consultant can do for you. Typical service offerings provided by admissions consultants include:

- ☐ An end-to-end service that starts with an in-depth interview, where the consultant will get to know you and learn about your experiences, your goals, and your strengths and weaknesses. The consultant will then help you develop a compelling application story (this is usually the most valuable part of the consultant's offering), and work with you to weave it through every part of your application, especially your essays and your recommendations. The consultant will also coach you on how to handle the interview. Admissions consultants tend to know the top business schools quite well, and they will give you a professional second opinion on which schools you should consider based on your profile.
- ☐ A more limited offering that covers certain parts of your application, most often your essays. These services appeal to applicants who are confident that their application stories are sound, and want some help in fine tuning their message. Some consultants offer this "stripped-down" service as an alternative to an end-to-end service, while others strictly offer essay editing services.

In terms of pricing, you can expect that access to such services will set you back anywhere from \$50 to \$4,000. Naturally, the more a consultant does for you, the more you will pay. Some will charge you a flat fee for their services, while others will charge you on a per-application or a per-essay basis.

Once you hire a consultant for the "full-service" treatment, he will first take an in-depth inventory of your career up until this point. He will quiz you on:

- ☐ What extracurriculars you did in college.
- ☐ Why you chose your major.
- ☐ Your grades in college.
- ☐ Why you chose your current employer.
- ☐ Evidence of success in your job.
- ☐ Your extracurriculars outside of the workplace.
- ☐ Your future career goals.
- ☐ Your GMAT scores (if you have taken the exam).
- ☐ What you're looking for in a business school.
- ☐ Which schools you are targeting.

He may also ask for writing samples, including any application essays that you have already written. All of these questions will help him answer the question of, “How good are this applicant’s chances?” He will evaluate you using the same criteria that admissions committees use, and will be pretty frank about your chances at each of your target schools, possibly suggesting that you narrow or broaden your scope.

Once your admissions consultant knows you better, he will work with you to develop an overall application story. This will be the high-level “Here’s who I am, and this is where I want to go” theme, similar to the story that this book helps you create. Once that is in place, he will work with you on each of the application components. Most consultants will spend the majority of their time on your essays, followed by your recommendations and your interview. If your GMAT score is too low, an admissions consultant can help point you to the right resources.

The most value that admissions consultants provide is usually in helping you present your story in a coherent package and in supplying you with third-party insight. They usually have a good idea of what each school is looking for, and are usually on top of the trends in business school admissions. Some even offer post-admissions advice, such as which courses to take once you get to school, although most applicants mainly pay for the chance to improve their admissions odds.

So, cost aside, admissions consultants do tend to help people get in. Similar to GMAT prep courses, at the very least these services tend to provide a good kick in the pants for applicants who need someone looking over their shoulder, prodding them to get their recommendations in on time, etc. They’re also usually good essay editors, and they generally do know what admissions committees are looking for. But know that no admissions consultant (at least not any scrupulous one) will write your essays for you. He will push you, stretch your thinking, and help you remember accomplishments that you didn’t think would matter in your application, but he will not simply take your resume and spin it into a golden application. The bottom line is that only you can write your own story. Admissions counselors can help you discover it, but you’ll have to tell it.

Now let’s return to the big question of whether or not you should hire an admissions consultant, first by answering an easier question: Do you need these services? Almost always, the answer is no. Given enough time and the right resources (all of which add up to far less than the price of a consulting service), nearly anyone can research a school in depth, craft a compelling story, develop a strong set of essays, perform well on the GMAT, get glowing recommendations, and nail the interview. In short, you can most likely do on your own all of the things that you would hire an admissions consultant to help you do. It’s just a matter of time, motivation, and resources (this book will play a large role in the last one).

Finally, you have to take these service’s success records with a grain of salt. There is likely some selection bias going on. We believe that admissions consultants are telling the truth when they boast that most of their clients get into at least one of their target schools, but we don’t know much about who their clients are. Even if they don’t have GMAT scores hovering somewhere above the stratosphere, they are probably among the more motivated applicants you will find. We don’t doubt that admissions consultants have helped

all of these applicants to some extent, but you have to wonder how many of these applicants would have gotten in on their own.

Okay, so who does use these services? Someone must be paying money to these consultants if they're still around, right? There are definitely situations in which a business school candidate would benefit from an admissions consultant, more than the average applicant would:

- ❑ **No business experience:** We discussed these kinds of applicants in Chapter 3. They absolutely can get into business school, but they may have an unclear understanding of how to communicate their experiences in a way that admissions officers will respond to. Also, unlike bankers or consultants, they likely know far fewer people who can give them advice throughout the process. Thus, admissions consultants can often add insight to which they might not otherwise have access.
- ❑ **A glaring weakness:** Some people will never get above a 600 on the GMAT, no matter how hard they try. In instances like these, an admissions consultant can help applicants bolster their perceived analytical abilities (often by encouraging them to do the things that we advise in this book), and help them overcome weaknesses with an application that shines in every other way. More generally, consultants can sometimes help an applicant rise above a shortcoming that would otherwise keep him out of his target school.
- ❑ **International applicants:** Similar to the “no business experience” crowd, some international applicants may have a harder time getting their hands on sound application advice and information on their target schools, in which case admissions consultants can help. Also, consultants can help them with simple language barrier issues that could keep them from gaining admission.

Lastly, some applicants enroll the help of an admissions consultant because they simply lack the confidence that they can get in on their own. If you've read this book, have evaluated your own background, and still feel that you don't stand a chance, then it's okay to look into hiring a consultant. But don't fool yourself into thinking that the competition walks on water, and that the only way you stand a chance of getting in is by hiring a professional. It's easy to get caught up in an imaginary arms race in which everyone else is taking GMAT prep courses and buying books on how to get in, so you need to do them one better by hiring a full-blown admissions consulting service. The reality is that most other applicants are just like you—they have some good experiences, are bright, can communicate pretty well, but also have a weakness or two. Some have GMAT scores above yours, and some have more impressive professional experiences, but none of them is any more entitled to a top-tier MBA than you are. So relax and let your personality and your strengths come through in every part of your application. Using this book will help you do exactly that.

FAQs

Does it matter which round I apply in?

The old adage is, “the earlier you apply, the better.” Generally, admissions officers state that there is very little difference between the first and second rounds. Beyond round two, however, many schools fill just a handful of remaining seats, so your odds of getting in plummet dramatically. We recommend not even considering applying after the second round, unless you find yourself in an extreme circumstance. We recommend the first round above the second round for a couple of reasons. First, more applicants apply in round two than in any other round, meaning that you will have a better chance (even if it’s a slight one) of standing out in round one. Also, applying early helps to communicate your interest in the school, which is always a plus. Finally, applying in the first round means that you will probably receive responses from your schools in the January time frame. This is advantageous from a planning standpoint. After all, there is plenty of work to be done after you receive an admittance.

If you are confident that waiting to apply in the second round will give you time to take your application from good to great, then that is definitely a tradeoff that is worth making. You want to make sure to put your best foot forward even if that means waiting a round.

As an international applicant to U.S. b-schools, how do I translate my GPA?

For the most part, you shouldn’t need to translate your GPA. In general, international applicants (defined as an applicant who is neither a U.S. citizen nor a U.S. permanent resident) are required to submit their official academic records in their original language along with literal English translations prepared by the academic institutions. Most schools will also accept translations from the consulate, embassy, or other such organizations of the institutions’ country. Business schools are very familiar with the various grading policies across countries and are very aware that the 4.0 scale used in the United States is not universal. For that reason, U.S. b-schools take a close look at your academic standing relative to your classmates in assessing your performance. You should follow up with your target schools in order to understand their specific policies.

Do my AWA scores really matter?

In comparison to the base and individual GMAT scores, the AWA doesn’t matter much at all. When was the last time you saw a b-school publish its average AWA score? In judging applicants’ writing ability, schools tend to emphasize their own essays much more than the AWA and pretty much glance at the score as an afterthought. With that said, you shouldn’t totally blow off the AWA. There are some cases in which the school will take a closer look at the score; most notably in a situation where admissions counselors suspect someone else other than the applicant responded to application essays. That alarm can be triggered when the applicant comes from a highly technical or international background, has the essays of a literary genius and an AWA score below 4.0. Therefore, you should become familiar with this portion of the exam and attempt a few sample essays, but you shouldn’t spend nearly as much time preparing for it as you do preparing for the main sections of the GMAT.

Is it possible to increase my GMAT score more than a few points?

As a business school applicant, you will most likely run into some people who will insist that the GMAT exam is like an IQ test in that you can't improve your score. This is definitely not the case. While you may never be able to hit 800, you can definitely improve your score by a significant amount. There are a number of applicants who were able to increase their score by well over 100 points. The key is to remain diligent in preparation and to not develop a psychological apprehension towards taking the exam.

What do schools do if I retake the GMAT?

Schools almost universally take your highest total score into consideration if you retake the GMAT. This is in the school's best interest because it allows the school to report higher average GMAT scores to periodicals for their rankings. Indeed, as average scores have increased, applicants have begun to retake the exam more often. You shouldn't, however, take the examination over and over again indiscriminately. Schools that see such behavior will question whether you understand what the purpose of applying is. Taking the exam more than three times may raise some eyebrows, so you should put your best foot forward on each attempt.

How early in the process should I interview?

Just like everything else in the application process, scheduling an interview earlier rather than later should only help your chances (when it is actually up to you to schedule the interview). From a logistics perspective, scheduling early is beneficial because spots are taken very quickly. Friday interviews can be especially difficult to lock down. We recommend spending a great deal of time on your application, getting it done early, and then doing your interview shortly thereafter.

Should I always do an interview, even if it's optional?

Yes, you should make every effort to interview with your target schools. It will demonstrate your interest and help the admissions committee put a face to a name. If it's difficult for you to arrange an interview (such as for geographic reasons), then going through the process of setting one up is all the more impressive. If you can't do one in person, try to at least arrange a telephone interview, which is better than nothing.

What should I do if the interviewer is rude or late?

If your interviewer is considerably late but it doesn't affect the amount of time that you have for the interview, let it go. Focus on being positive and getting your main points across once the interview begins. If your interviewer's late arrival does cut into the amount of time that you have, then consider requesting a follow-up interview. Few interviewers will put you in this situation (the ones that do are typically harried alums), but if they do, be positive and polite, but firm.

If your interviewer is just plain rude (again, this tends to happen with alumni more than with admissions personnel), keep your cool. They may very well be testing you, so the worst thing you can do is try to fight fire with fire. Stay calm and confidently answer the questions that they ask. Remember, it's up to you to emphasize your main points. It's not up to the interviewer to get you to bring them out. If you are asked an inappropriate question (it's been known to happen), know that you don't have to answer it. Stay positive and professional, but let the interviewer know that you won't get sucked in.

After the interview, if you feel that the interviewer behaved unprofessionally and that you weren't able to make your case because of it, consider contacting someone in the admissions office to request a new interview. Again, keep it as positive as possible and remember that the goal is to get yourself into business school, not to get back at your interviewer.

Some candidates are tempted to contact the admissions office after they have a bad interview, even if the interviewer did nothing wrong. Don't do this. It will sound "whiny," and will most likely only hurt your chances. Also, a lot of applicants feel that they bombed their interview when they actually get a positive evaluation. In that case, calling undue attention to the interview can only hurt your cause. Only contact the admissions committee if the interviewer behaved rudely or unprofessionally in some way.

What if I freeze up?

If your interviewer asks you a question and your mind goes blank, it's entirely okay to take a moment to collect your thoughts. In fact, most interviewers appreciate it when an applicant says something like "Let me think about that for a moment" or "That's a good question." Silence is okay. In fact, silence is considered to be one of the most effective communication tools there is, so learn to get comfortable with it. Pausing shows that you're giving a question a lot of thought, which is good. Whatever you do, don't just start talking and hope for something good to come out. Many applicants do this, but they end up doing more harm than good. If you are at a loss, simply take a deep breath and take a few moments to gather your thoughts before speaking. It will only help you.

If I'm intending to return to my present company after graduation, what message should I convey?

This is something at which many applicants fail miserably. Uninspired by the fact that they will return to their present employer after business school, applicants who fall into this category tend to write about their career goals in a dispassionate manner. If you intend to return to your current company, then say so. It's fine to acknowledge the fact that it's the career path you would like to follow. However, you need to be very specific in demonstrating how an MBA will help improve your skills. Additionally, you need to demonstrate how you intend to have an impact on the future direction of the company. This doesn't mean listing the titles you hope to achieve, but rather stating the problems you want to address and some form of innovation that you would like to use in addressing them. Simply highlighting the fact that you intend to return to XYZ consulting firm will make you sound just like 95 percent of your direct competitors. Go the extra step, and be explicit about what you will do that you can't do without an MBA.

Who should I have review my essays?

Ideally, among the people who review your essays will be a good writer/editor, one person who knows you really well, and someone who is familiar with the business school application process (such as a current student, alum, or fellow applicant). You obviously want a good writer to read your essay to check for grammatical errors and ways in which you can improve the structure of your essays. You would also like someone who knows you well enough to read them, as a sort of litmus test to make sure that the essays actually sound like they came from you. After all, your own voice should come through in your essays. Finally, someone who has navigated the admissions process will

be able to provide other insights as to how well your essays help your overall application story. One person may very well fit all three of these descriptions, in which case you don't need too many people reading your essays. However, showing your essays to at least one person who doesn't know you too well can help, because that person is better able to flag areas that are confusing to someone who isn't familiar with your background. Plus, having an extra set of eyeballs to catch typos is always a good thing.

One note: It is possible to get too much feedback. Some applicants try to incorporate so much feedback into their essays that the final product sounds nothing like what they started with. As a result, the application no longer sounds as though it were written by the applicant. Remember that you have the final say on everything that goes into your essays. Don't feel obligated to include every last bit of advice that you receive.

How many recommenders should I recruit?

You may only need two or three recommenders total, but it depends on how many schools you apply to, and on how busy your recommenders are. Start by recruiting your immediate supervisor or, if this isn't possible, another coworker who knows you well and can comment on your professional abilities. You'll then want to add one more colleague from your work, and perhaps someone who can comment on your abilities in another light, such as someone whom you know from an extracurricular activity. You can reasonably expect each person to complete at most three or four recommendations. More is possible, but you'll risk spreading each recommender too thin. So, be ready to recruit more recommenders as needed, assuming that each additional recommender is also qualified to comment on your strengths and weaknesses. Ideally, though, your immediate supervisor will complete a recommendation for every one of your target schools. Because most schools ask that one of your recommendations come from your supervisor, do everything in your power to make it easy for her to complete a recommendation for each one of your applications.

My supervisor's writing is horrendous. What should I do?

This can be a delicate situation, depending on how close you are with your supervisor, but there are ways to deal with it. If you know ahead of time that your supervisor's writing isn't strong but don't feel comfortable reviewing her recommendation, then consider recruiting a capable third party to serve as an editor. Ask your boss, "Would you mind having Jane give it a read-through before you submit it?" Most bosses will respond positively, or they may even suggest that you review it yourself, but few will balk at the suggestion. After all, they want to help you get in (unless they hate you, in which case you should ask someone else for a recommendation). Once you or someone else is able to review it and make changes, pick your spots carefully. Don't obsess over every word or punctuation mark (although you want to catch all obvious typos), but rather focus on making sure that the recommendation is readable, is well-organized, and makes the points that you want emphasized. Don't be afraid to make the changes that need to be made, or at least suggest them. When you go back to your boss with the revisions, keep everything very positive, and give reasons for your suggestions. Most supervisors will appreciate the help. If yours doesn't, and you know that the final product is destined to be terrible, then start looking for a Plan B. After all, how intelligent your recommenders come across in their written work will reflect upon you, too.

How do schools use the evaluation grid that recommenders are required to fill out?

Admissions officers know that most recommenders feel that they need to give “Outstanding” ratings for each trait in the evaluation grid, lest they hurt their applicant’s chances. They therefore don’t place too much emphasis on the grid, and instead spend most of their time reading the recommendation letter. Still, the grid communicates a good amount of information very quickly, and application readers will scan it to get an idea of what your strengths and weaknesses are. If your recommender gives you the absolute best rating in each category, then that actually doesn’t give the admissions committee much to go on (other than the fact that you’re amazing, which the rest of your recommendation had better support). If you receive “Outstanding” ratings for four categories and receive “Very Good” for the other two, then the admissions committee will think about those two a bit more, and see what your recommender has to say about those traits elsewhere in the recommendation. In any case, what the grid says is less important than the supporting evidence that is presented in the written recommendation. Nonetheless, you probably don’t want your recommender giving you anything lower than the second rating. Anything below that will likely catch an application reader’s eye and cause him to dig deeper. Your main focus should be on arming your recommenders with examples that illustrate each of the traits in the grid will help you the most.

What is an appropriate gift to get my recommenders for their assistance?

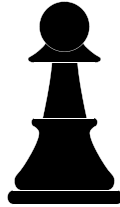
Writing recommendations is a difficult job; especially when you consider the busy schedules of those who are often asked to do it. After it’s all said and done, your recommenders definitely deserve some recognition for their efforts. Giving each recommender a token of your appreciation is the least that you can do as an applicant. Depending on how well you know your recommenders, there are a number of great gifts with which you can provide them. Common examples include: a gift certificates to a nice restaurant, fresh flowers, or wine. Some applicants wait until they receive their admittances and then give their recommenders a memento from their chosen school, such as a shirt, sweatshirt, or coffee mug. Naturally this strategy can backfire if you don’t get admitted. Regardless, there is only one simple rule that you should follow: “Don’t be cheap!” In addition to a thoughtful gift, a handwritten thank-you card is also always a nice gesture. Outside of common courtesy, showing your gratitude is a good idea because you never know whether you might have to call on your recommenders again to serve as your champions (for job references, etc.). Making them glad that they helped you now will only make it easier for you to ask for their help again in the future.

How should I structure my resume if I’m a recent college graduate or have no professional work experience?

As mentioned in Chapter 3, if you’re in this situation, you should try to emphasize your leadership, maturity, and teamwork dimensions. Because you don’t have much professional experience, the education section should come first. Here you should discuss as many extracurricular activities as possible that display those dimensions. Additionally, this is a case in which you should include your GMAT score and your GPA, assuming that they’re high, to show your intellectual capacity. If you have any work experience, including internships or entrepreneurial ventures, make sure to include them.

5

DEVELOPING STRATEGIES FOR THE TOP PROGRAMS



You've demonstrated your strengths and addressed your weaknesses. You have multiple examples that demonstrate your leadership and problem-solving capacity. Your differentiated position will leap off the page as the admissions committee pores over your application.

Great. You're halfway there. Now comes the other—equally important—part: demonstrating how you and your skills are a good fit for each of your target schools. Applicants sometimes forget about this part of the process. After all, a lot of schools' essay questions seem pretty similar. No harm in just copying and pasting, changing the school's name, tweaking a few lines, and moving on, right? In reality, most applicants have done this with at least one application, but doing so means possibly missing what each school is really looking for.

Researching Schools

So how exactly do you determine what a school wants in its applicants? Start with the usual suspects:

- ❑ **The school's Website:** This is a no-brainer these days. Here you can get high-level information on the school, learn about its curriculum and faculty, and start to get a sense for what it's known for (or what it wants to be known for, which is sometimes more important).
- ❑ **Third-party Websites:** For different perspectives on business schools and the application process, check out Websites that dedicate content to the b-school applicant audience. Some of the more popular sites include: BusinessWeek Online (www.businessweek.com/bschools) and MBA Jungle (www.mbajungle.com).
- ❑ **Brochure and application:** These are readily accessible on any school's Website. It can be painful to look at brochure after brochure of what seems

to be the same material, but you should really spend some time with these. Think about how long each admissions officer will spend getting to know your application, and spend at least twice as much time with the school's material. More than many applicants realize, schools are fairly explicit about what they are looking for, and these materials are a natural starting point for finding this information.

- ❑ **Rankings:** Rankings are notoriously overused, but they can give you a good high-level flavor for each school. While the brochures may tell you what the schools want to be known for, the rankings issued by periodicals are sometimes a good reality check that let you know what a school is actually good at.
- ❑ **Campus visit:** Whether or not you interview on campus, you should plan on visiting each school in which you're truly interested, unless geography makes it impossible. Walk around, meet some current students, sit in on a class, and at least visit the admissions office to let the school know you came. Odds are that the office will probably blow you off, but it's worth a shot. Whether or not you get any good face time with an admission officer, make sure to mention your visit somewhere in your application to show your sincere interest in the school.
- ❑ **Current students:** Students are probably the most underutilized resource. Even if you don't visit the campus, it's easy to find business school students' contact info on the Web. Find one with whom you have something in common and send her an e-mail. Some students are just too busy to have a real heart-to-heart with you, but odds are that you'll easily find someone who's willing to give you the skinny on the school. Think of a few things you want to know about life at the school and fire away. This is a safe way to ask candid questions about the school.
- ❑ **Alumni:** Alumni are especially helpful in answering questions about what life will be like after business school. Ask them about their experiences in school, but realize that schools evolve over time, so realize that someone who graduated 15 years ago probably had a pretty different experience than what you would face.
- ❑ **MBA Forums:** MBA Forums, hosted by the GMAC, provide applicants with an informal environment in which they can learn more about business schools and the admissions process. Over 200 b-schools typically attend these forums, which take place in cities around the world. In addition to opportunities to speak with b-school representatives, MBA Forums host workshops that assist applicants in selecting their target schools and in exploring their career options. For more information on MBA Forums, check out www.mba.com.

Understanding the Rankings

The periodic ranking of top business schools has become one of the most discussed aspects of the application process. Since 1988, when *BusinessWeek* released its first biennial ranking, multiple other media outlets have also taken a cut at evaluating business schools including: *U.S. News and World Report*, *Financial Times*, and more recently, *The Wall Street Journal*. Currently, each outlet claims to have the most precise, and therefore applicable, ranking methodology and has earned numerous sales as a result of their claims. Indeed, the rankings are generally the first place aspiring applicants look when deciding whether and where to apply. No doubt you will evaluate the ranking that rates your favorite school the highest as the most “fair.”

Not many people would have expected it 20 years ago, but the rankings have gained a lot of power in influencing both applicants and schools themselves. Here is a quick look at what some of the major issues surrounding the rankings are.

Impact

Rankings have had a powerful effect on the business school world. Recruiters, admissions directors, faculty, students, and applicants all keep a close eye on them. Over time, most schools have made positive changes to their facilities, curricula, and recruiting processes as a result of issues that the media outlets have uncovered. If a business school makes a jump in the rankings, then the dean will most likely trumpet the success. Should a business school slip, however, then crisis management techniques often kick in. It is not unheard of for members of the business school community to be fired over a poor ranking.

Controversy

The power of the rankings has also become the center of controversy. An underlying, inherent goal of media outlets is to sell newspapers, magazines, and books. Their core competency is probably not to provide suggestions for business school improvements. Nonetheless, this is often the result of their insights. Many would argue that the rankings’ ability to affect business school change has become too great and needs to be curtailed. Your challenge is to understand the rankings and their methodologies so that their impact on your decision-making is not overstated.

Methodologies

BusinessWeek

The oldest and perhaps the most publicized modern ranking of business schools comes from *BusinessWeek*. Its ranking methodology focuses on three components: student evaluations (45 percent), recruiter evaluations (45 percent), and the schools’ intellectual capital (10 percent). *BusinessWeek*’s perspective is that customer evaluation (in this case students and recruiters) is what matters most in evaluating a business schools’ abilities. The rankings are mainly based on responses to surveys taken by recent business school graduates and a majority of the recruiters who hire them. Because of the survey format, *BusinessWeek*’s rankings are always accompanied by detailed anecdotal information.

The *BusinessWeek* rankings are often criticized, however, for their high degree of subjectivity. Using recent graduates' perspectives as a heavily weighted component of the rankings is the aspect of this subjectivity that is most often denounced. These criticisms definitely carry some validity, as it seems a bit contradictory to create a relative ranking using input from students who have only attended one business school. That contradiction is compounded by alumni's incentive to inflate the scores that they use in evaluating their schools. Why would an alum give her school a low evaluation when she has such a vested interest in the school's status? Another apparent weakness of the *BusinessWeek* rankings is the time at which the students are evaluated. Because they have only recently graduated, it is difficult to imagine that they have more than a limited view of the value of their MBA.

Financial Times

The rankings released by *Financial Times* are undisputedly based on the most complex methodology of all of the media outlets. First released in 1999, in response to *BusinessWeek* and *U.S. News and World Report's* omission of international programs, *Financial Times* uses 20 criteria in its evaluation of business schools. These criteria can be segmented into three groups:

- ❑ **Employment:** Salary increase over three years, return on business school investment, career progress, achievement of post-MBA goals, job employment success, and recruiter recommendations.
- ❑ **Diversity and International:** Women faculty, students, and board members; international faculty, students, and board members; international mobility and curriculum.
- ❑ **Faculty and Research:** Faculty with doctorates, number of doctoral graduates, and faculty publications.

The *Financial Times* differentiates itself from the others by taking into account graduate performance a few years after graduation and by evaluating the schools' international and research foci. However, only 2 percent of the weighting in the ranking takes the recruiters' perspectives into account and there is no formal evaluation of curricula outside of the international and research components.

U.S. News and World Report

U.S. News and World Report releases an annual ranking of the top business schools along with rankings for advanced degree programs in education, engineering, law, and medicine. Its rankings first appeared on the scene in 1990, using a mixture of subjective and objective criteria for its evaluations. This mixture creates a straightforward balance that is absent in the other rankings. The methodology is composed of eight criteria including: dean and program director evaluation, recruiter evaluation, starting compensation, job placement, GMAT score, undergraduate GPA, and percentage of application rejections.

Many would argue, however, that the methodology has contributed to selection bias. By heavily weighting the GMAT score and undergraduate GPA, *U.S. News* may encourage admissions committees to turn away applicants who might cause them to

slip in the rankings. The academic peer evaluations have also raised eyebrows, as deans and program directors have an incentive to discount other business schools in their ratings.

The Wall Street Journal

In 2001, *The Wall Street Journal* shook up the rankings world by introducing a methodology that is based solely on the perspective of recruiters. The survey-based methodology is subjective in nature and asks recruiters to evaluate business schools and their students according to 26 attributes. The results of the surveys have been drastically different than any of the other three rankings, as some of the historically top schools were shuffled to the bottom and many schools normally neglected were pushed to the forefront.

Similar to the *BusinessWeek* rankings, a great deal of anecdotal revelations have resulted from the rankings, but the methodology has several contradictions from the perspective of applicants. Because recruiters and students sit on opposite sides of the negotiating table, there are some attributes that benefit recruiters when students are disadvantaged. For example, one of the attributes of the survey has been “past acceptance rate of job offers from a student at this school.” Naturally, from a recruiter’s perspective, the higher the acceptance rate, the better. From a student’s perspective, however, higher acceptance rates can mean less job opportunities. Aspiring applicants should therefore keep in mind that students’ perspectives are not accounted for in this methodology. Many applicants have completely written this methodology off for that reason. Between the first release of the rankings and the second release, *The Wall Street Journal* made some adjustments to the survey questions to minimize some of those contradictions. Our understanding is that more adjustments are forthcoming.

Usage

So the big question remains, “*How should I view the rankings?*” The rankings should be viewed as another source of information, but definitely not as the be all, end all. If you decide to apply to the schools ranked 15–20 based on the assigned number alone, then you are probably making a bad choice. The high variation of where schools fall in the different rankings alone indicates that different schools will be better for you based on what you value. As such, rankings are a good starting point for researching schools, but shouldn’t be the focal point.

If you find yourself obsessing over the rankings (most of us do at some point), use your gut. Ask yourself: “Is there really a huge difference between the 10th-ranked school and the 15th-ranked school?” Probably not. There are differences, but they will be in the details, which you will uncover through your own research.

The question you should really ask yourself is: “What school(s) can meet my academic, professional, social, geographic, and financial needs?” Naturally, the answer to this question will be different for every person. That is why no single set of rankings really works for everyone. It is a question that you must answer based on all the information available. No methodology will simply produce it for you.

The rankings of the four media outlets are listed on page 130.

Financial Times 2003 Business School Rankings

School	Rank
University of Pennsylvania (Wharton)	1
Harvard Business School	2
Columbia University	3
Stanford University GSB	4
University of Chicago	4
INSEAD	6
London Business School	7
New York University (Stern)	8
Northwestern University (Kellogg)	9
MIT (Sloan)	10
Dartmouth College (Tuck)	11
Yale School of Management	12
IMD	13
University of Virginia (Darden)	14
Duke University (Fuqua)	15
University of California-Berkeley (Haas)	15
Georgetown University (McDonough)	17
Iese Business School	18
Cornell University (Johnson)	19
University of California-L.A. (Anderson)	20
University of Toronto (Rotman)	21
University of Western Ontario	22
Carnegie Mellon University	23
University of North Carolina (Kenan-Flagler)	23
University of Michigan Business School	25
Instituto de Empresa	26
York University (Schulich)	26
Rotterdam School of Management	28
Emory University (Goizueta)	29
University of Cambridge (Judge)	30

BusinessWeek 2002 Business School Rankings

School	Rank
Northwestern University	1
University of Chicago	2
Harvard Business School	3
Stanford University	4
University of Pennsylvania (Wharton)	5
MIT (Sloan)	6
Columbia University	7
University of Michigan	8
Duke University (Fuqua)	9
Dartmouth College (Tuck)	10
Cornell University (Johnson)	11
University of Virginia (Darden)	12
University of California-Berkeley (Haas)	13
Yale University	14
New York University (Stern)	15
University of California-L.A. (Anderson)	15
University of Southern California (Marshall)	17
University of North Carolina (Kenan-Flagler)	18
Carnegie Mellon University	19
Indiana University (Kelley)	20
University of Texas-Austin (McCombs)	21
Emory University (Goizueta)	22
Michigan State University (Broad)	23
Washington University (Olin)	24
University of Maryland (Smith)	25
Purdue University (Krannert)	26
University of Rochester (Simon)	27
Vanderbilt University (Owen)	28
Notre Dame (Mendoza)	29
Georgetown University (McDonough)	30

U.S. News 2003 Business School Rankings

School	Rank
Harvard University	1
Stanford University	2
University of Pennsylvania (Wharton)	2
MIT (Sloan)	4
Northwestern University (Kellogg)	4
Columbia University	6
Duke University (Fuqua)	7
University of California- Berkeley (Haas)	7
University of Chicago	9
Dartmouth College (Tuck)	10
University of Virginia (Darden)	11
New York University (Stern)	12
University of Michigan	13
Yale University	14
Cornell University (Johnson)	16
Carnegie Mellon University	17
University of Texas-Austin (McCombs)	17
Ohio State University (Fisher)	19
University of Southern California (Marshall)	20
Emory University (Goizueta)	21
University of North Carolina (Kenan-Flagler)	21
Indiana University (Kelley)	23
Georgetown University (McDonough)	24
Purdue University (Krannert)	24
University of Minnesota (Carlson)	26
Rice University (Jones)	27
University of Florida (Warrington)	27
Brigham Young University (Marriott)	29
University of Iowa (Tippie)	29
University of Notre Dame (Medoza)	29
Washington University-St. Louis (Olin)	29

Wall Street Journal 2003 Business School Rankings

School	Rank
Dartmouth College (Tuck)	1
University of Michigan	2
Carnegie Mellon University	3
Northwestern University (Kellogg)	4
University of Pennsylvania (Wharton)	5
University of Chicago	6
University of Texas-Austin (McCombs)	7
Yale University	8
Harvard Business School	9
Columbia University	10
Purdue University (Krannert)	11
University of North Carolina (Kenan-Flagler)	12
Michigan State University (Broad)	13
Indiana University (Kelley)	14
University of California-Berkeley (Haas)	15
University of Maryland (Smith)	16
Emory University (Goizueta)	17
Cornell University (Johnson)	18
University of Virginia (Darden)	19
IMD International	20
University of Rochester (Simon)	21
Wake Forest University (Babcock)	22
New York University (Stern)	23
Duke University (Fuqua)	24
Vanderbilt University (Owen)	25
ITESM	26
IPADE	27
Southern Methodist University (Cox)	28
MIT (Sloan)	29

The school selection process

Wouldn't it be great if schools had to submit an application for you to review and then you had the opportunity to accept or reject them? Selecting which school(s) to which you will apply is about the closest you'll come to this. In selecting your schools, you must make a decision on how many to focus on. In general, there seems to be two divided camps on this decision.

The shotgun camp

Members of the shotgun camp believe that applying to top business schools is like shooting in the dark, so they use the biggest gun possible. They claim that the applicant selection process is essentially random, and they therefore target as many schools as possible. The thought is that in doing so, they will raise their overall chances of admittance. It can be easy to be seduced by the theory that the process is entirely random when you look at the low acceptance rates and hear stories of people getting into Stanford, but getting dinged by Samford. Although no one will deny that there is a certain level of "randomness" in the selection process, basing your application approach on that premise can have disastrous results. The more applications you add to the pile, the more difficult it will be to tailor them to your schools. You have to conduct more research, solicit more recommendations, and produce more essays; not mention shell out more cash (application fees can cost up to \$200 each).

Ultimately this approach generally leads to a bunch of applications that all look the same. Because of schools' concerns with fit, this approach can lead to several rejections and just as bad, admittance into a school you don't want to attend. Because of these pitfalls, successful applicants tend to be members of the sniper camp.

The sniper camp

Members of the sniper camp maintain that by utilizing application strategy you have a much better chance of hitting your targets. The key here is for the applicant to perform due diligence on the schools that interest her and then conduct even more research after the target schools have been selected. By limiting the number of target schools based on their fit with your needs and objectives, you will be able to create a better story that fits with those schools rather than under the shotgun approach. Additionally, you will have more time and resources to show the requisite interest in your target schools by visiting campuses, talking to students and alumni, and investigating interesting program-specific opportunities.

You will find some applicants who succeed using the shotgun approach. But overall, taking a strategic approach will allow you to have a better chance at gaining acceptance and will allow you to get to know your target schools better.

How many schools should I apply to?

So the analogies are great, but where are the tangible numbers? We suggest that the average applicant apply to three or four schools. This allows you to target one stretch school, one safety school, and one or two schools that seem right within your range. Naturally, many external factors such as significant others, or financial or geographical constraints can present situations that call for applying to a different number

of schools, but in general, three to four will allow you to perform an adequate amount of due diligence and still give you enough coverage to maximize your probability of acceptance. When you apply to more than four, you risk diluting your applications' content and limit your ability to establish fit with each target school.

Differences across schools

As you explore potential target schools, you will notice that many of the brochures look and sound the same. Indeed, there are several business school trends that have pushed schools to adopt similar learning models. Once you visit the schools, however, and dig a little deeper, you will begin to notice that there are larger differences across schools than you initially thought. Three differences across schools that you should pay special attention to are the learning model, typical career paths of graduates, and the culture.

The learning model

Most business school curricula are composed of a combination of three pedagogical methods:

- ❑ **Case study:** The case study method is an integral part of most students' business school experience. Cases are two to 50 page documents that focus on real-world management situations and generally place the reader in the shoes of a decision-maker. Each case generally focuses on a single topic within a course and can be written for any class from Marketing to Finance. Class discussions based on the case method are consistently dynamic and rarely conclude in a single solution. The professor generally begins class with a dreaded "cold-call." A cold-call is a business school tradition, whereby an unsuspecting student is asked to introduce the case and provide his perspectives on how the decision-maker (referred to as the case protagonist) in the case should respond to the challenges described by the case. After the student has provided his perspectives, the professor invites other students to participate and a dialogue ensues. Generally, students speak for more than 80 percent of the class with the professor directing the conversation flow. Sometimes, the case protagonist is even present and provides concluding comments on the class's dialogue.
- ❑ **Lecture:** We're all familiar with this teaching method. Most schools use the lecture format to teach the more technical aspects of their curricula.
- ❑ **Experiential:** Experiential teaching methods, which include business simulations, consulting projects, business plan development, and group activities, are becoming more popular among business schools. Many students enjoy the opportunity to put the knowledge that they've gained in the classroom to work.

As you research schools, you will discover that they all place different emphases on these three approaches. When reviewing the learning models, consider the type of academic environment from which you will benefit most. Also, know that business schools differ in terms of the amount of work (inside and outside of class) that students typically must complete. You should be able to get a decent feel of a b-school's workload

by speaking with students and reviewing curriculum requirements. Beware, however, of asking students to compare the workload at their school to that of other schools, as students are notorious for exaggerating cross-school differences.

Typical career paths of graduates

Business schools probably focus on recruiting more than any other type of graduate school program. As soon as students begin classes, there is a strong emphasis placed on career selection and development. Most business school graduates evaluate their alma maters, to a large degree, based on the schools' ability to help them meet their career objectives. It only makes sense, therefore, to examine the career opportunities that different b-schools provide. What you will find is that different companies recruit at different schools generally because of geographical or skill and experience requirements. Many students find themselves in a situation where they decide to attend a school only to find out that many of the companies in which they are interested do not recruit from that school.

Most programs release an annual career guide that provides a wealth of recruiting information, which should give you an idea as to whether that program aligns well with your career goals. Keep in mind, however, that schools can sometimes be generous when they list who their "recruiting partners" are. They often lump all companies who hired any graduates—whether the company came on campus and hired a dozen people or hired just one person who got the job on her own—into one list in their brochures. So, pay attention and make sure that the companies in which you are really interested actually have a presence on campus. One good measure is learning how many alumni from your school are at a given company. Additionally, you should consider speaking with current students and alumni to see if your career goals fit well with the recruiting support that the school provides. Finally, consider the overall level of support that the career center provides students and what its relationship with recruiters is like. Career centers can differ drastically in terms of their performance and you certainly want to be at a school that offers a broad level of support and that maintains close relationships with recruiters.

Culture

While the learning model and recruiting opportunities may be the most obvious areas to research prior to selecting your target schools, examining schools' cultures is just as important. The best way to get a feel for a school's culture is to visit the campus, chat with students, and check out a class. Each school has its own mission, values, and norms. This has a powerful effect on the student experience, and you should take the time to gain an understanding of the type of culture with which you best fit prior to deciding on your target schools. Also, don't forget that any school's culture is the sum of the individual personalities at the school. When you visit, make sure to meet students and ask yourself "Do these seem like the kind of people I'd want to study with at 2 a.m.?"

Application Strategies for 30 Top Business Schools

Now that you have an idea of how to approach the school selection process, we will delve deeper and provide specific strategies on how to get into 30 top schools. While we provide insights for each of these schools, the techniques we've outlined in previous

chapters are applicable to all business schools. There are dozens of other good schools (in the United States and abroad) that we don't cover here.

The purpose here is to apply the dimension framework described in Chapter 2 to 30 schools and to give you some school-specific information that you can utilize in developing application strategies for your target schools. These 30 business school application strategies each provide application requirements, school background information, and advice on how to approach the school's application. The application strategies also feature a section called "insider information," which highlights a trend that you can leverage in your application or a key insight that insiders say should be featured in your approach. Finally, we've selected up to four other schools that call for a similar application strategy. Please note that this is not to say that the schools are exactly alike, but rather that applicants have been successful in employing similar strategies across those schools.

Don't read too much into the 30 schools we selected. We reviewed all of the major rankings and picked 30 schools, both domestic and international, that received broad support as top business schools.

Without further ado, here are individual application strategies for 30 top business schools.

Carnegie Mellon University Graduate School of Industrial Administration

www.gsia.cmu.edu

Pittsburgh, PA

Application at a glance

Application due dates (first, second, third, and fourth round): Nov. 15, Jan. 15, Mar. 31, Apr. 30.

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Three essays (two pages each).
- ☐ Interview: By invitation only.
- ☐ Recommendations: Two, with one preferably coming from your direct supervisor.
- ☐ Resume.
- ☐ Application fee: \$100.

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): Kenneth B. Dunn (2002)

Admissions director: Laurie Stewart

Program size: 469 full-time

Acceptance rate: 26 percent

Yield: 54 percent
Mean undergraduate GPA: 3.3
Mean GMAT: 672
Middle 80 percent GMAT: 610-730
Average years of work experience: 5.5
International: 34 percent
Women: 23 percent
Minority: 22 percent

Your Carnegie Mellon application strategy

Carnegie Mellon's MBA program is highly analytical, as quantitative rigor is integrated throughout the entire curriculum. The school's proper name—Carnegie Mellon Graduate School of Industrial Administration—invokes images of a program turning out leaders for the manufacturing sector. Although this is partially accurate, the school is also well known in finance circles, where Carnegie Mellon grads' quantitative skills are also highly prized.

While many schools have a minimum math requirement for applicants, Carnegie Mellon expects its applicants to have at least completed one college-level calculus course along with another high-level course in calculus, statistics, or linear algebra. Don't worry, you can take a course part-time before enrolling, but realize that quantitative skills are something that will have to come through in your application no matter what discipline you want to pursue. Also, more than half of each full-time class holds an undergraduate degree in a technical major. Make sure that you're capable of keeping up with applicants that have computer science and engineering backgrounds (if you don't have one yourself). This capability will mostly be represented in your GMAT score, your undergraduate studies, and your previous work experience.

The school's emphasis on analytical abilities is apparent in its core curriculum. Required courses in Probability and Statistics, Decision Models, and Operations Management have the usual dose of quantitative lessons. But classes such as Finance and Economics also have a heavy dose of analytics. One unique feature of the program is its mini-semester system. Students have four mini-semesters a year, instead of the more typical two-semester system. Starting in the spring semester of their first year, students can begin taking electives at the business school as well as at Carnegie Mellon's other schools. If you are interested in expanding your knowledge in such fields as biotechnology or computer science while earning your MBA, explore and consider discussing these opportunities. They provide great ways for you to demonstrate fit and enthusiasm for the flexibility of Carnegie Mellon's program.

Carnegie Mellon also touts its practical, hands-on approach to learning, exemplified by its Management Game, a highly involved computer simulation that runs from the last mini-semester of the first year through the first semester of the second year. Student teams each run their own simulated business, making decisions affecting operations, finance, marketing, and labor relations. Adding a level of realism to the game, each team is assigned a board of directors, comprised of local business leaders.

Teams also practice contract negotiations with local labor leaders and consult with law students at the University of Pittsburgh.

The Management Game requires not only superior quantitative skills, but also strong communications and teamwork abilities, both of which the school also looks for in its applicants. If you are an applicant coming from engineering or an otherwise technical background, be sure to bring out the teamwork dimension in your application. Carnegie Mellon values strong thinkers, but values most those strong thinkers who can turn insights into action.

Nearly half of the 2002 graduates pursued careers in finance, especially corporate finance in the manufacturing sector. Healthcare is also a popular choice for graduates (including pharmaceuticals and biotechnology). Carnegie Mellon alumni are also active entrepreneurs, and the school looks for entrepreneurship traits in its applicants. If you have entrepreneurial aspirations, discussing them in your essays and during your interview can be a great way to establish fit with what the school looks for in its applicants.

Insider information

You won't find any majors at Carnegie Mellon, or any academic departments for that matter. The school promotes an interdisciplinary approach to learning, encouraging faculty members from different fields to teach courses together. The result is a fairly broad approach to management education. While students can choose from concentrations in 12 different subjects, most tend to choose multiple concentrations, further broadening their learning. While Carnegie Mellon's deep analytical focus makes it very different from other general management programs such as Harvard or Darden, keep the school's interdisciplinary philosophy in mind as you build your application story.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ MIT (Sloan).
- ☐ Purdue (Krannert).
- ☐ University of Chicago.
- ☐ University of Rochester (Simon).

Columbia Business School

www.gsb.columbia.edu

New York, NY

Application at a glance

Application due dates (Early Decision, International, Domestic): Oct. 15, Mar. 1, Apr. 20 (rolling admissions).

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Four (one of 1,000 words, two of 500 words, and one of 250 words).

- ☐ Interview: By invitation only.
- ☐ Recommendations: Two, with one preferably coming from your direct supervisor.
- ☐ Resume (professional resume and activities resume).
- ☐ Application fee: \$180.

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): Meyer Feldberg (1989)

Admissions director: Linda Meehan

Program size: 1,200 full-time

Acceptance rate: 11 percent

Yield: 72 percent

Mean undergraduate GPA: 3.5 (estimate)

Mean GMAT: 705

Middle 80 percent GMAT: 670-750

Average years of work experience: 4.0

International: 28 percent

Women: 35 percent

Minority: 20 percent

Your Columbia application strategy

Make no mistake, Columbia is a finance school above all else. Students rave about the school's finance faculty and the access that they have to top Wall Street executives. The alumni network doesn't hurt either—nearly every Wall Street firm is stacked with Columbia alumni. The result is that most finance-minded applicants consider Columbia. If you are one of them, you will need to especially focus on differentiating yourself from a large pool of similar-sounding applicants. Therefore, start thinking now about what makes you different from the rest of the investment bankers (and aspiring bankers) who apply to Columbia. Chapter 3 should help in that regard.

As you might expect, Columbia's core curriculum is heavy in finance and related courses. First-years take required courses in Financial Accounting, Corporate Finance, and Global Economics, among others. Non-finance topics such as Marketing and Strategy, however, are studied in half-term courses. While these courses are also strong, be aware that much of your time will be spent on finance-related topics. Of course, you will therefore need to demonstrate an ability to handle a quantitative workload, ideally through your GMAT score and relevant work experience.

One academic area that Columbia emphasizes outside of finance is entrepreneurship. Some of the school's most popular electives include "Introduction to Venturing" and "Launching New Ventures." Entrepreneurship is also studied and pursued outside of the classroom. Launched in 1996, the Eugene Lang Entrepreneurial Initiative Fund provides seed capital to worthy business plans crafted by Columbia students.

The Fund acts less like a traditional business plan competition and more like a venture capital firm, taking an equity stake in any Columbia start-up with promise (with the school benefiting if the venture takes off). For students looking for a more conventional business plan competition, Columbia has joined forces with UC Berkeley's Haas School of Business to run the Social Venture Competition, which provides seed money to promising start-ups whose goal is to have a positive social impact. The bottom line is that if you are interested in an MBA for entrepreneurial reasons, let the Columbia admissions committee hear about it in your essays and your interview.

Columbia also emphasizes the international aspect of its curriculum. Each semester, the school's Chazen Institute of International Business offers fellowships to up to four students for their work in advancing Columbia's global approach both inside and outside of the school. The Chazen Institute also runs an exchange program that gives students the opportunity to study abroad at one of 22 partner schools, as well as participate in international study tours. Keep this in mind as you craft your story for why you will fit in at Columbia.

Although they acknowledge that their peers are competitive, students and grads emphasize that Columbia is not a cutthroat environment. Most consider Columbia to be a competitive but respectful and helpful community. Students spend their entire first year in the same "cluster" of 60 students, taking their core classes together. Like other schools, Columbia encourages cooperation and trust within these clusters. As such, you will need to demonstrate the ability to get along with your peers. Also, like other schools in big cities, Columbia sometimes has to battle the reputation that its students spend less time on campus with each other. Demonstrating your enthusiasm for the program and a willingness to get involved in extracurricular activities will help show that you don't fit this stereotype.

Insider information

Columbia's other departments aren't as well known as its finance department, and some grads have commented that these other departments take a backseat to finance. However, the school's administration has a reputation for going out of its way to respond to students' concerns. If you are interested in an area outside of finance, particularly something as far as removed such as organizational behavior or nonprofit management, Columbia may be worth a look. Your interest outside of finance alone will help you stand out, provided that you can prove that you have the quantitative skills and business acumen to learn alongside the finance crowd.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ NYU (Stern).
- ☐ University of Pennsylvania (Wharton).
- ☐ University of Chicago.
- ☐ University of London (LBS).

Cornell University (Johnson Graduate School of Management)

www.johnson.cornell.edu
Ithaca, NY

Application at a glance

Two Year Program application due dates (first, second, third round): Nov. 15, Jan. 15, Mar. 15.

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Four (400 words each).
- ☐ Interview: By invitation only.
- ☐ Recommendations: Two, both should come from people who are familiar with your professional capabilities and at least one from a direct supervisor.
- ☐ Resume.
- ☐ Application fee: \$200.

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): Robert J. Swieringa (1997)

Admissions director: Natalie M. Grinblatt

Program size: 560 full-time

Acceptance rate: 22 percent

Yield: 57 percent

Mean GPA: 3.3

Mean GMAT: 680

Middle 80 percent GMAT: 600-730

Average years of work experience: 5.0

International: 23 percent

Women: 28 percent

Minority: 23 percent

Your Johnson application strategy

Johnson is a quintessential small MBA program. With less than 300 members in each class, students receive a high degree of attention from faculty and from the dean. Perhaps no other top business school program emphasizes professor accessibility as much as Johnson does. Professors at Johnson literally open their homes to students and go the extra mile to ensure that opportunities to learn course concepts extend beyond the classroom. Indeed, joining the Johnson program is more like joining the Johnson family. Your application should echo that sentiment in addition to reflecting the core values upon which the Johnson program has built its reputation.

The values that are central to the Johnson program include: a dedication to analytical rigor, an action-oriented approach to learning, and a collaborative learning environment. Your application should highlight your ability to think in an analytical manner. This could manifest itself through a discussion of how you focus on developing solutions, your approach to analyzing problems, or an analytically driven business idea that you have. Analytical in this sense doesn't purely mean numbers oriented (although Johnson will take a close look at your quantitative GMAT score), but rather it means based on rational and in-depth thought and examination. Examples you can provide along those lines will help you establish fit with the analytical strength Johnson values in addition to its application-focused learning model. As a member of the Johnson family, you will be expected to contribute to your classmates' learning and to the school as a whole. Said in another way, Johnson is looking for applicants who are team players. While you definitely shouldn't shy away from publicizing your accomplishments, be careful not to come across as arrogant in tone and be sure that your recommenders reflect positively upon your teamwork skills.

Although Johnson is a general management program in that there are no majors and a majority of courses that students take are electives, the program's strength lies in its finance curriculum. Johnson even offers a financial engineering program that focuses on subjects such as: derivatives, portfolio analysis, stochastic processes, and computer-based modeling. Another alternative for those who are interested in technical training is the Twelve Month Option MBA program. This program requires an advanced scientific or technical degree and is perfect for those applicants who don't want to be out of the workforce for two years.

Like many other b-schools, Johnson has jumped on the "leadership bandwagon." However, leadership potential is not merely a criterion listed in brochure material; it is one of the most important applicant characteristics by which you will be evaluated. In fact, Johnson offers up to 30 two-year full-tuition scholarships to students who have demonstrated exemplary performance in the area of leadership. The admissions committee will look to see whether you take initiative on a regular basis and will specifically assess how you have an impact on your professional and personal environments. Writing about leadership roles that you've taken on and how those roles have progressively increased in level of responsibility is a great way to implicitly state your further leadership potential. Your interview is another proving ground on which leadership will be discussed. You should anticipate that you will receive several questions on leadership, especially questions asking you to provide examples of displayed leadership. You should also anticipate being asked a question on current business events, so make sure you have a decent understanding of what's going on in the business world before your interview. Respond to "situation" questions using the SAR interview framework discussed in Chapter 4. Chapter 4 also contains a comprehensive set of interview questions on leadership that will serve as great preparation.

Similar to its learning model, Johnson's application offers more flexibility than most. This becomes most apparent in its essay requirements, which allow you to select from a great number of options. Utilize this flexibility to cover all four dimensions discussed in Chapter 2. Your emphasis, however, should be on the leadership and innovation

dimensions. Your ability to establish fit along these lines will help grant you entry into the Johnson family.

Insider information

The Immersion Learning curriculum is probably the best example of Johnson's action-oriented approach to learning. Immersion Learning, also referred to as "the semester in reality," is an experiential method that allows students to take a hands-on approach to functions such as: Managerial Finance, Investment Banking, Brand Management, Manufacturing, and e-business. Students visit companies, work on actual business challenges, and are evaluated based on the solutions that they develop in response to those challenges. Discussion of Immersion Learning can be a great way to display your knowledge of the Johnson learning model.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ Dartmouth College (Tuck).
- ☐ University of Michigan Business School.
- ☐ University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Kenan-Flagler).
- ☐ University of Virginia (Darden).

Dartmouth College (Tuck School of Business)

www.tuck.dartmouth.edu

Hanover, NH

Application at a glance

Application due dates (Early Action, first, second, third round): Oct. 18, Nov. 1, Jan. 3, Apr. 18.

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Five (four of 100 words, one of unlimited length answering a mini-case question).
- ☐ Interview: Required.
- ☐ Recommendations: Two "Confidential Statements of Qualifications," with one preferably coming from your direct supervisor.
- ☐ Application fee: \$180.

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): Paul Danos (1995)

Admissions director: Kristine Laca

Program size: 470 full-time

Acceptance rate: 14 percent

Yield: 51 percent

Mean undergraduate GPA: 3.4

Mean GMAT: 698

Middle 80 percent GMAT: 640–760

Average years of work experience: 4.8

International: 29 percent

Women: 32 percent

Minority: 17 percent

Your Tuck application strategy

Think small. Think intimate. Think great outdoors. That's exactly what life at Tuck is all about. The country's first graduate school of business offers one of the smallest programs among the top 30 schools, with fewer than 250 students in each class. The small class size—coupled with the school's location in rural Hanover, New Hampshire—results in a close-knit community in which everyone knows everyone else.

Academically, Tuck's MBA program focuses on turning out competent general managers. Most of the first-year curriculum consists of core courses in the main management disciplines (including Finance, Marketing, Strategy, and Economics), with the second year left open for electives. No specific majors are offered. First-year students complete most of their coursework in the same study group, which Tuck emphasizes as a way for students to grow closer and develop their teamwork skills. More than the average top program, Tuck is looking for students who demonstrate strong teamwork skills, so make sure that this is a main theme in your Tuck application.

Tuck is also serious about leadership, and one unique part of the first-year experience is the Tuck Leadership Forum, which runs throughout the first year. The Forum is a series of mini-courses in topics such as management communication and entrepreneurial management, all designed to help improve students' leadership skills. Students then complete a team project, such as creating a business plan or doing consulting work for an existing business. The program also provides students with a chance to work closely with faculty and plug into Tuck's alumni network while still in school.

Speaking of the alumni, what Tuck lacks in size is made up for in devotion. Tuck's alumni have been described by some as “fierce” in their loyalty to the school and to each other. Tuck touts its alumni's 60 percent plus annual giving rate as further evidence of this dedication. While the school may not have an alum in every company, Tuck students are known to get good results from the alumni they do call upon. In your own application, make sure that you can provide convincing proof that you, too, will be an active alum, preferably by demonstrating loyalty to your undergraduate school.

Tuck's remote location means that it's not for everyone. Some applicants, especially those with spouses, often find it difficult to relocate to Hanover. To its credit, Tuck goes out of its way to make the transition a smooth one, often providing spouses and partners with full-time work around campus. Still, only slightly more than half of Tuck's admitted applicants actually enroll in the program. This means two things for you: (1) Make sure that you really want to attend Tuck before you apply. It's a great school, but its size and location sometimes turn people off. Save yourself a lot of time

if you think these aspects of the program will be a problem for you. (2) Even more importantly, you really need to demonstrate why Tuck is for you. Tuck's students tend to be passionate about their school, and you need to demonstrate this same passion in your application. Visiting the school—especially for your interview—can go a long way toward helping you make your case. Also, think about applying in Tuck's Early Action round (with applications due in mid-October) if you are sure that Tuck is where you want to be. This relatively new program is a great chance for you to show your commitment to the school.

Insider information

Tuck isn't the household name that Stanford and Harvard are, but its general management program is known to be one of the best in the country. Tuck graduates have a strong reputation in consulting and financial services, particularly on the East Coast, where nearly two-thirds of its graduates end up living after school. If you are considering a career in general management, or are interested in consulting or banking, don't overlook Tuck. If you can demonstrate that the school's environment is right for you, and make a case for why the general management approach is what you want out of business school, then Tuck will give your application strong consideration.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ Cornell University (Johnson).
- ☐ Duke University (Fuqua).
- ☐ Emory University (Goizueta).
- ☐ University of Virginia (Darden).

Duke University (Fuqua School of Business)

www.fuqua.duke.edu

Durham, NC

Application at a glance

Application due dates (first, second, third, fourth round): Oct. 31, Dec. 16, Jan. 30, Mar. 13.

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Three essays (one of 250 words, one of 400 words, and one of 500 words).
- ☐ Interview: Highly recommended.
- ☐ Recommendations: Two, with one preferably coming from your direct supervisor.
- ☐ Resume.
- ☐ Application fee: \$175 online, \$200 paper.

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): Douglas T. Breeden (2001)

Admissions director: Liz Riley

Program size: 700 full-time

Acceptance rate: 19 percent

Yield: 57 percent

Mean undergraduate GPA: 3.6

Mean GMAT: 701

Middle 80 percent GMAT: 640–760

Average years of work experience: 5.0

International: 34 percent

Women: 34 percent

Minority: 21 percent

Your Fuqua application strategy

No school has come as far as Fuqua (pronounced: “FEW-kwa”) has in the last 20 years. Duke opened its business school in 1969, but things really started to happen after the school took J.B. Fuqua’s name (and his money) in 1980. What was once a well-regarded school with mostly regional appeal has grown into one of the top business programs in the world.

Young and small, Fuqua has an advantage over the business school competition with its innovative curriculum and approach to learning. Students have four terms (of six weeks each) per year, meaning that they get a taste of many more subjects than students at most other schools. Fuqua’s emphasis has traditionally been on turning out general managers, although recent graduate classes have skewed more towards marketing. The only concentration that the school offers is its Health Sector Management (HSM) program, which takes advantage of the school’s location in Research Triangle Park in North Carolina. If you are interested in biotech, pharmaceuticals, medical devices, or healthcare management, take a close look at this program.

Fuqua has also been aggressive in giving its students opportunities to study abroad, and currently has reciprocal exchange programs with 25 international business schools. Its Global Academic Travel Experience (GATE) program provides students with the opportunity to travel abroad for a shorter period of time. GATE is extremely popular with students, with close to half of the class participating in the program for two weeks each year. Fuqua’s push to build its brand around the world means that it looks for applicants with global perspective. If you have international experience, be sure to emphasize it in your application. If you haven’t worked abroad, that’s okay. You definitely don’t need to lie about wanting to spend your next five years in Hong Kong. Just demonstrating a willingness to work with people of other backgrounds (and any experience that you might have in this area) is a great start.

Work in most classes is done in teams, and Fuqua’s graduates have gained a team-ready reputation that rivals that of Kellogg’s graduates. Students often refer

to themselves as “Team Fuqua,” and they mean it. They also have a reputation for being some of the most energetic and close-knit students at any business school. This is reinforced by the fact that Fuqua is a smaller school—approximately 700 full-time students in 2003. When you apply to Fuqua, make it clear that you understand what it means to be part of a smaller community, and spell out why it appeals to you. Along those lines, Fuqua students are heavily involved in everything going on at the school. If you apply Duke, make sure that this is what you want out of your business school experience. Even more importantly, make sure to make that clear in your application through multiple examples of teamwork and involvement.

Fuqua’s focus on excellence in general management will definitely come out during the interview. Most interviews are conducted by students who are members of the admissions committee. It is therefore important to position yourself as a prospect that your interviewer would like to have as a classmate. This means you should provide examples of professional excellence, but do so in a non-arrogant tone. In the back of his mind, your interviewer will be evaluating you as a potential team member in addition to evaluating you as a leader. If you have three years professional experience or less, you should also expect to receive questions on your ability to contribute in the classroom. Have a response prepared as to why “now” is a good time for you to attend Fuqua.

Insider information

Fuqua has built a strong reputation, and it now attracts many of the same people who also apply to the Harvards and Whartons of the world. The downside for Fuqua is that some top applicants still view Fuqua as somewhat of a backup school, even though Fuqua’s acceptance rate is below 20 percent. This is evident in the school’s yield (percentage of accepted students who enroll), which was 57 percent in 2001, more than 10 percent below that of other top schools. The school therefore looks for applicants who are interested in Fuqua for what it offers, not just because it’s listed next to the other big names in the rankings. In other words, the admissions committee wants to be sure that if they accept you, you will enroll. If you can demonstrate that you truly want to attend Fuqua—and *why* this is so—you will greatly improve your chances.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ Northwestern University (Kellogg).
- ☐ Dartmouth College (Tuck).
- ☐ University of Michigan Business School.
- ☐ University of California at Berkeley (Haas).

Emory University (Goizueta Business School)

www.goizueta.emory.edu

Atlanta, GA

Application at a glance

Application due dates (Early I, Early II, Final): Nov. 1, Jan. 2, Mar. 15 (rolling admissions).

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Four (two of two pages, two of one page).
- ☐ Interview: Highly recommended.
- ☐ Recommendations: Two required, three recommended, preferably from supervisors or coworkers.
- ☐ Application fee: \$100.

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): Thomas S. Robertson (1998)

Admissions director: Julie Barefoot

Program size: 390 full-time

Acceptance rate: 24 percent

Yield: 46 percent

Mean undergraduate GPA: 3.4

Mean GMAT: 675

Middle 80 percent GMAT: 610–740

Average years of work experience: 5.5

International: 31 percent

Women: 22 percent

Minority: 9 percent

Your Goizueta application strategy

Emory University's Goizueta (pronounced: "goy-SWET-uh") Business School is one of the smallest of the nation's top programs, with just 170 entering the school's traditional two-year MBA program each year. Like other small programs, Goizueta is noted for its close-knit culture and high student involvement in every aspect of the school. Student Action Groups give students a strong voice in many of the school's departments, including admissions, curriculum development, marketing, and facilities planning. Not surprisingly, the school expects that each of its students will get involved in at least one opportunity to leave a mark on the school.

Goizueta promotes its own flavor of leadership training, which it calls Leadership in Action. The school believes that effective leadership requires seven important traits—courage, integrity, accountability, rigor, diversity, teamwork, and community—which it

has deemed its “Core Values.” Goizueta students are immediately introduced to the school’s Core Values during their orientation week, with one activity devoted to each of the school’s core values. Students participate in ropes courses and skydiving to learn courage, perform service projects to gain a sense of community, etc. In other words, the school expects each student to embrace its Core Values, and you should be prepared to explain what these values mean to you.

Before the start of each semester, Goizueta students take part in a pre-term course called Lead Week, an intense program that gives them exposure to real-world business issues. Before the start of the first-year fall term, students study a series of cases focused on a single company. Each case emphasizes an academic discipline, such as operations, strategy, finance, or marketing. Students compete in teams to prepare analyses and recommendations for the subject company, and the winning team gets to present its findings to the company’s executives. To start the second year, student teams compete in a business plan competition, with each team preparing a business plan from scratch and pitching it to a panel of venture capitalists. Lead Week programs in the winter and spring give students opportunities to focus on topics of their choosing, and even study issues abroad. Additionally, Goizueta Plus is a series of seminars that students take in their first year, giving them the opportunity to explore their own personal interests, their leadership traits, communication skills, and larger issues in business ethics. Although these programs are constantly evolving, they remain a centerpiece of the Goizueta program, and expressing an understanding of how they embody the school’s Core Values will help strengthen your application.

The annual Goizueta Marketing Strategy Competition gives student teams another chance to tackle real-world business challenges. Students work with executives from partner corporations in developing solutions for real marketing challenges that these businesses face. While performing their analyses and developing their recommendations, students are coached by faculty members and receive additional training through a series of training seminars. A panel of executives and Goizueta faculty judge each team’s output, with the winning team taking home \$10,000. Especially if you are interested in marketing, be sure to express your enthusiasm for the competition and hands-on experience that it provides.

While most schools prefer students with some amount of work experience, Goizueta explicitly states that students need at least a year of work experience in order to apply. It is therefore not surprising that its student body tends to skew slightly older than those of other top schools. Although all schools look for maturity in their applicants, Goizueta is clear about the importance of this dimension of your application. It is therefore important to choose essay and interview stories that emphasize your own professional maturity.

Insider information

Perhaps Goizueta’s most important espoused Core Value is courage, which the school defines as a willingness to take risks and push yourself out of your comfort zone. The school believes that this is an important component of leadership, and you can therefore expect the Goizueta admissions committee to look for examples of this trait

in your application. The school is most interested in the applicant who takes the road less traveled and is willing to take some risks. Any way in which you can demonstrate this trait in your own past—and what you learned from it—will help the admissions committee see how you fit in at Goizueta. Think about how you can weave these stories into your application, particularly in the essays.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ Cornell University (Johnson).
- ☐ Dartmouth College (Tuck).
- ☐ UNC (Kenan-Flagler).
- ☐ USC (Marshall).

Harvard Business School

www.hbs.edu

Boston, MA

Application at a Glance

Application due dates (first, second, third round): Oct. 17, Jan. 7, Mar. 11.

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Six (five of 400 words, one of 600 words).
- ☐ Interview: By invitation only.
- ☐ Recommendations: Three, with one preferably coming from your direct supervisor.
- ☐ Resume.
- ☐ Application fee: \$190.

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): Kim Clark (1995)

Admissions director: Brit Dewey

Program size: 1,800 full-time

Acceptance rate: 10 percent

Yield: 89 percent

Mean GPA: 3.6

Mean GMAT: 705

Middle 80 percent GMAT: 670–755 (estimate)

Average years of work experience: 4.3

International: 32 percent

Women: 35 percent

Minority: 24 percent

Your Harvard application strategy

Leadership is unquestionably the most emphasized dimension at Harvard Business School (HBS). The school's mission is to "develop outstanding business leaders who contribute to the well-being of society." This mission, along with the school's community standards, can be found posted in every classroom on campus. Candidates' potential as leaders should therefore permeate every aspect of the HBS application. Leadership should be projected on multiple levels; professional experience, academic experience, extracurricular activities, hobbies, and community service can all be used to highlight leadership capabilities. Good examples demonstrate your ability to have positive influence over the actions of others. A focus on leadership should also play a role in describing your career goals. More than most schools, HBS will closely evaluate your career goals based on their level of impact on society. Finally, remember to describe your leadership style and how it has changed over time. The admissions committee is really interested in what you have learned along the way and will be impressed with reflections on your "leadership evolution."

HBS is known as the quintessential general management program. In line with the mission of the school, students' decision-making ability across multiple business disciplines is the constant focal point. Students do not formally specialize in a particular aspect of business, as they do at most schools, and take the first year required curriculum in sections of 80–90 students.

The section experience is one of the defining aspects of the HBS learning model, as each student is expected to take on the responsibility of teaching her classmates. Students constantly draw from their own background and experiences, creating a dynamic atmosphere that is supplemented by the faculty's insights. To ensure that classrooms are filled with numerous perspectives, students' backgrounds are extremely diverse in nature. It is not uncommon for most sections to contain, lawyers, teachers, investment bankers, doctors, consultants, brand managers, professional athletes, military officers, and entrepreneurs. The required curriculum in the first year is followed by an entirely elective curriculum in the second year. Students utilize this year to further hone their decision-making abilities in areas that they believe will be the most beneficial for their careers.

Applicants should be aware that their undergraduate school's reputation will be factored into the selection process at HBS. The undergraduate schools that are most densely represented are Harvard University, University of Pennsylvania, and Stanford University. This, however, should definitely *not* be a deterrent to applicants from lesser known schools. Indeed, more than 150 undergraduate institutions are represented in a typical HBS class. Nonetheless, applicants who graduated from schools with less brand strength than most should make a concerted effort to highlight the strengths of their school and their accomplishments at the school. One way to do this is through the recommendation process.

HBS is one of the few business schools that doesn't mind recommendations from former professors. While your recommendation approach should primarily focus on your professional experience, a recommendation that highlights your academic prowess can help augment your position as an applicant. The professor's recommendation

can add credibility to your school's reputation, thereby granting credibility to your entire application. Should you go down this path, however, make sure that the professor is in a position to comment on your leadership capabilities and on your professional goals. If the professor isn't that familiar with you and your story, then it's best to seek out a recommendation from a different source.

Being part of the HBS community is a life-long commitment. This is highlighted by the fact that the alumni network is often one of the first points that is raised when discussing HBS's differentiating factors. It is therefore to your advantage to show ways in which you have been a champion for your alma mater. The admissions committee isn't just concerned about what you will bring to the table during your time in the classroom, but also how you will remain involved with and support the school in the future.

Insider information

The case study method is the lifeblood of the HBS learning model. This cannot be stressed enough. By graduation, students can expect to have conquered more than 500 cases in addition to textbooks, notes, and articles that provide conceptual depth to the case scenarios. Each case addresses a class topic and provides a "real-world" example on how the topic is applicable. New cases are constantly produced by professors and students will often receive a freshly written case hot off the press less than a week before discussing it. Second year students are even granted the opportunity to assist in the case writing process by participating in a field study. Producing cases has become such a core part of HBS that a majority of business schools purchase their case studies from it.

Displaying a grasp of the case method and how it is utilized at HBS is an excellent way to differentiate yourself from other applicants. You should emphasize your ability to engage in open discussions and your desire to learn based on real-world business applications. Both of these components are central to the way in which case studies are taught at HBS. Discussing your learning style and how you would benefit from case studies will also show your understanding of the learning model.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ INSEAD.
- ☐ University of Virginia (Darden).
- ☐ University of Western Ontario (Ivey).
- ☐ Yale School of Management.

Indiana University (Kelley School of Business)***www.kelley.indiana.edu*****Bloomington, IN****Application at a glance**

Application due dates (first, second, third, fourth round): Dec. 1, Jan. 15, Mar. 1, Apr. 15.

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Three essays (two pages each).
- ☐ Interview: Recommended.
- ☐ Recommendations: Two, both should come from people who are familiar with your professional capabilities.
- ☐ Resume.
- ☐ Application fee: \$75.

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): Dan R. Dalton (1997)

Admissions director: James Holmen

Program size: 520 full-time

Acceptance rate: 22 percent

Yield: 45 percent

Mean GPA: 3.4

Mean GMAT: 651

Middle 80 percent GMAT: 580–710

Average years of work experience: 5.3

International: 30 percent

Women: 25 percent

Minority: 16 percent

Your Kelley application strategy

Curriculum innovation is one of the strongest assets of the Kelley learning model. The curriculum continues to receive accolades for its integrated, cross-functional approach to teaching. The basis of the approach is that real-world business challenges are not discretely segmented into functions and therefore business school should be taught in an integrated manner. The admissions committee is looking for applicants with leadership potential who view business issues in a cross-functional way and are interested in participating in a learning model that is taught in an equally integrated and flexible fashion.

The initial 24 weeks of the first year are split into three sections: Grasping the Foundations of Management and Decision-making, Identifying New Business Opportunities, and Managing an Ongoing Enterprise Profitably. These sections consist of a total of 14 modules, each module building upon the lessons of the previous modules. The goal of the core curriculum is to provide students with tools and intuition that will be invaluable in making management decisions. As a checkpoint, mid-way through the core, students participate in a team-based case competition, which allows them to display the benefits of integrated learning. One way for you to display an appreciation for the Kelley approach is to discuss how the results of actions you've taken in a business environment have been beneficial to multiple functions and not just the one to which you belong.

Outside of the core curriculum, students select majors and minors from a suite of 11 options including: E-Business, Finance, Information Systems, Marketing, Production/Operations Management, and Strategic Management Consulting. If none of the options suits their needs, students can design their own major that fits with their career interests. To supplement their specialized study, students can apply to participate in an "Academy." Academies are industry-focused and allow students to take part in career-focused course work and professional development activities such as discussions with professionals in the industry, a speaker series, and trips to relevant companies. There are Academies for Consumer Marketing, Entrepreneurship, Global Experience, Health Care, Investment Banking, Investment Management, Sports and Entertainment, and Management Consulting. Discussing these learning opportunities and how they would benefit you in achieving your career goals is a great way to establish fit with Kelley.

Looking into the future, Kelley will continue to focus attention on technology, leadership, and global initiatives. Technology is viewed as a powerful enabler of many of the strategies discussed in the classroom and Kelley strives to be recognized as a front-runner in the usage of technology. Like most other top business schools, Kelley would like to be known as an institution that produces leaders and has established its Leadership Development Institute to help support that objective. From an international perspective, Kelley has gradually increased its international student percentage to 30 percent, and has added several study abroad opportunities. If you have the background or the direction to capitalize on any of these trends, make sure to spell them out in your application.

If the curriculum is the heart of the Kelley learning model, then the faculty is the life-blood. The faculty receives high praise for accessibility, commitment, and expertise. The strong commitment of the faculty has helped create a collegial environment in which teamwork is a strong norm. The admissions committee will be very interested to hear ways in which you can contribute to this environment. Loners and gunners need not apply.

Insider information

While interviewing with Kelley is not required, it is encouraged. Nonetheless, only approximately 50 percent of applicants participate in the interview. The interview is an excellent opportunity for you to establish fit with the program as well as to display a true desire to attend the school. Your initiative will be duly noted by an admissions committee that is looking to increase its yield percentage.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ Michigan State University (Broad).
- ☐ Purdue University (Krannert).
- ☐ University of Maryland (Smith).
- ☐ University of Texas at Austin (McCombs).

INSEAD

www.insead.edu/mba

Fontainebleau, France, and Singapore

Application at a glance

Application due dates: Feb. 1 for September intake, Jul. 1 for January intake (rolling admissions).

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Eight (200–500 words each).
- ☐ Interview: By invitation only.
- ☐ Recommendations: Two, both should come from people who are familiar with your professional capabilities.
- ☐ Application fee: •200.

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): Gabriel Hawawini (2000)

Admissions director: Inger Pedersen

Program size: 840 full-time

Acceptance rate: 27 percent

Yield: 80 percent

Mean GPA: N/A

Mean GMAT: 694

Middle 80 percent GMAT: 660–730

Average years of work experience: 5.0

International: 93 percent (foreign nationals)

Women: 24 percent

Minority: N/A

Your INSEAD application strategy

Spanning two continents and with a major presence on a third, INSEAD is making strides toward its goal of being recognized as the preeminent international MBA. The one-year general management program operates on campuses in France and Singapore and maintains an alliance with the Wharton School. Given its goal, INSEAD is in search

of applicants who bring significant international exposure, academic excellence, and a solid professional background to the table.

The curriculum itself is general management in nature and lasts for 10 1/2 months. There are two different start dates, one which begins in September and another which begins in January. After receiving admittance into INSEAD, students may state their preference for either the Fontainebleau or Singapore campus. In either case, the program structure is the same and students have opportunities to visit the campus to which they are not assigned. The curriculum is divided into five eight-week periods and calls for students to take 15 required courses and a minimum of seven electives. Electives consist of advanced topics in Finance, Accounting, General Management, Marketing, Entrepreneurship, International Business, Ethics, and Running Family Businesses. Members of the January intake participate in a summer internship between periods three and four.

As far as international diversity goes, you would be hard-pressed to find another business school that rivals INSEAD. No one nationality represents more than 10 percent of the student body and less than half come from Western countries, meaning that the “international student” concept is essentially nonexistent. Students are quick to acknowledge this level of diversity as a differentiating factor, as the learning model gives credence to multiple approaches without showing bias to any. INSEAD also demonstrates its commitment to a global mindset through language requirements. Students must be proficient in at least two languages by matriculation and three by graduation. To establish fit, you should incorporate an international perspective in both your background and in your future goals. The admissions committee will closely evaluate your ability to have an impact on global business, so make sure that your story is not entirely nation-centric.

INSEAD views itself as an academic business institution. This is revealed through the large amount of general research that the school produces in addition to the writing of specific cases. Based on this perspective, INSEAD conducts a thorough assessment of your academic background. Specifically, the admissions committee will look at the reputation of your alma mater(s), your performance in the classroom, and your ability to handle quantitatively rigorous courses. If you don’t have a numbers-intensive background or have not fared well in such classes, consider taking a statistics or finance course at a community college.

Due in-part to the abbreviated duration of the program, INSEAD tends to accept applicants with at least several of years work experience (more than 45 percent have more than five years). The school believes that students with more professional experience are better able to adapt to the one-year curriculum and leverage it in their career development. Indeed, INSEAD takes career development very seriously, as each student is matched up with a mentor to assist with the process. The school even has teleconferencing equipment readily available so that students can interview with firms who are unable to make the trip to campus. Your challenge is to present your professional experiences in a way that highlights your success in the workplace and your ability to contribute to the classroom. Despite INSEAD’s tendency to accept more experienced applicants, you may still want to consider applying if you are younger, as the school does accept a small number of less-experienced applicants each year (about 15 percent

of students have two years or less). If you fall into this category, it is even more important that you emphasize the maturity dimension and discuss an array of experiences that are academic, professional, and personal in nature.

Teamwork is an essential part of the INSEAD learning model. The school's strength in diversity would be pointless if there was no cross-cultural learning involved. As such, students are assigned to study groups of five to seven in order to heighten the learning experience. Groups are diverse across multiple dimensions including: nationality, professional experience, gender, age, and education. Team members work closely together on class assignments and in some cases even exams. Any cross-cultural team-based experiences that you can discuss will go a long way in establishing fit with the INSEAD mission.

Insider information

While INSEAD has won international acclaim for its advances in business education, it is not resting on its laurels. INSEAD is actively seeking to expand the size of its program, especially the Singapore campus, and there are even discussions of establishing an entirely new campus. INSEAD has room to expand its program in part due to its high yield (approx. 80 percent), which should allow for more opportunities among applicants. With expansion on the way, potential applicants should consider INSEAD even if they are not linguistic geniuses. If you have a true desire to pursue a global career and are willing to put in work to develop your foreign language abilities, then INSEAD might be the business school for you.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ Harvard Business School.
- ☐ University of London (London Business School).

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Sloan School of Management)

mitsloan.mit.edu

Cambridge, MA

Application at a glance

Application due dates (first, second round): Nov. 13 and Feb. 5.

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Five (four of 500–800 words each including a cover letter, one of unlimited length).
- ☐ Interview: By invitation only.
- ☐ Recommendations: Two.
- ☐ Resume.
- ☐ Application fee: \$175 U.S., \$200 international.

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): Richard L. Schmalensee (1998)

Admissions director: Rod Garcia

Program size: 638 full-time

Acceptance rate: 13 percent

Yield: 68 percent

Mean undergraduate GPA: 3.5

Mean GMAT: 710

Middle 80 percent GMAT: 650–760

Average years of work experience: 4.9

International: 40 percent

Women: 27 percent

Minority: 18 percent

Your Sloan application strategy

Although not quite as well known as the “other” business school in Boston, MIT’s Sloan School of Management has combined the quantitative strengths of its parent school with a focus on entrepreneurship to establish itself as one of the most highly regarded programs in the technology and manufacturing industries. The school is also well-regarded on Wall Street, where Sloan grads are known for their quantitative abilities.

Sloan has traditionally been better known for turning out stronger analysts than business leaders, so the school is making a push to emphasize leadership in its curriculum. The school has appointed a Director of Leadership to create and run leadership programs at the school, as well as to coach Sloan students on their own leadership development. The school even encourages students to fill out a “Leadership Feedback Form” (anonymously, if they want) whenever they observe a fellow student in a leadership role. The school also encourages teamwork, and all first-year students must complete a core project in teams. Sloan’s stated goal is to turn out “leaders who innovate.”

As expected, the school’s curriculum emphasizes the quantitative side of business. Courses such as Finance and Statistics are as quantitative as you would expect, but Sloan also encourages students to apply the skills that they learn in these classes to nearly all of their coursework. Graduates speak highly of the hard skills that they learned at Sloan, so make sure that this is what you want out of your MBA experience. To get in, you will have to demonstrate that you are comfortable utilizing numbers, through your GMAT score, previous coursework, or job experience.

Sloan’s curriculum is also notable for its emphasis of “management tracks,” instead of traditional majors. The idea behind these tracks is to provide students with a broad study approach to a certain functional area, such as Financial Engineering, Operations Management, and New Product and Venture Development. The tracks’ broad approach requires students to complete eight to 10 classes per track. Students can also create

their own tracks after their first semester at Sloan. Demonstrating your understanding of Sloan's track system will help you show your enthusiasm for the program.

Entrepreneurship is big at Sloan, as characterized by students' participation in MIT's annual "\$50K" entrepreneurship competition. The competition gives Sloan students the chance to develop a business plan and compete against students from other MIT programs for a chance to win the \$30,000 grand prize (\$10,000 goes to each of the top two runner-up teams). Successful tech companies such as Akamai got their start through the \$50K competition, and student teams that get far in the program are often able to attract interest from potential investors and advisors.

One example of Sloan's close ties to the manufacturing sector is its Leaders for Manufacturing (LFM) program, a two-year joint degree program offered in conjunction with MIT's School of Engineering. It offers students courses in engineering, change management, information technology, and operations management through a variety of in-class and on-the-job experiences. Students spend six-and-a-half months on-site as an intern with a sponsor company, culminating in a thesis. The best part of the program is that students receive a scholarship covering the full cost of tuition, thanks to sponsor companies including Boeing, Dell, Harley-Davidson, Intel, and Procter & Gamble. The bad news is that the program is very exclusive—just 50 students participate each year—but give it a look if you are considering working in manufacturing after business school.

Insider information

Sloan has a higher percentage of international students than nearly all of its peer schools—40 percent of the class of 2003 came from abroad. Sloan students therefore tend to be surrounded by international classmates wherever they go. If you are looking to gain international experience, or just want to meet people from new cultures, this is an aspect of the program that may appeal to you. Make sure you demonstrate your enthusiasm for the school's diverse culture in your application, and make your case for why this matters to you, whether you are an American or an international applicant.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ Carnegie Mellon University.
- ☐ Stanford University.
- ☐ University of Chicago.
- ☐ University of Pennsylvania (Wharton).

Michigan State University (Eli Broad Graduate School of Management)

www.bus.msu.edu/mba

East Lansing, MI

Application at a glance

Application due dates (first, second, third, fourth round): Dec. 16, Jan. 31, Mar. 14, June 2.

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Two (one page each).
- ☐ Interview: Recommended.
- ☐ Recommendations: Two, with one preferably coming from someone who is familiar with your professional capabilities.
- ☐ Resume.
- ☐ Application fee: \$40.

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): Robert B. Duncan (2002)

Admissions director: Esmeralda Cardenal

Program size: 210 full-time

Acceptance rate: 22 percent

Yield: 53 percent

Mean GPA: 3.2

Mean GMAT: 639

Middle 80 percent GMAT: 570–710

Average years of work experience: 5.0

International: 30 percent

Women: 23 percent

Minority: 16 percent

Your Broad application strategy

Over the last few years, Broad (rhymes with “road”) has expanded its brand beyond “regional MBA” status. This expansion can be attributed to a quick rise in the b-school rankings and Broad’s strength in practical specializations. Students can select from four primary specializations (Supply Chain Management, Marketing Technology, Human Resource Management, and Finance). The Supply Chain Management (SCM) specialization has especially helped place Broad on the map. SCM, which focuses on manufacturing operations, logistics, and purchasing, continues to draw recruiters from across the nation that are looking to optimize their product and information flows. Students may supplement these areas of focus with secondary specializations, which include: Business Information Systems, Corporate Accounting, General Management, and Leadership & Change Management. Referencing your specialization interests and explaining how a background in those areas could support your career goals should be key components of your application strategy.

Another large asset of the program is its career services function. Broad’s career services group has made extensive efforts to attract a bevy of innovative companies to campus. As a result, Broad students now enjoy an average rate of job offers that is commensurate to or greater than that of other top programs. Some of the major recruiters include: Intel, Cap Gemini Ernst & Young, IBM, Ford, and A.T. Kearney.

You should take note that there is relatively little investment bank presence on campus. Along those lines, make sure that your career goals align well with Broad's strengths.

Broad students rave about the school's small size and the access to professors. They enjoy the intimate environment and the close relationships that are developed within the program. Unlike most other b-school programs, chances are that you will leave Broad knowing all of your classmates' names.

Over the last few years Broad has begun to make a name for itself through case competitions. Held around the globe, case competitions allow teams of three to six students to display their analytical, public speaking, and persuasion skills. Broad actively encourages students to participate in these competitions and assists in students' preparation for them. The results speak for themselves, as Broad students have come away with high placements in a number of these competitions. If you have any interest in participating in case competitions, bring them up as a great discussion point.

Broad's application is fairly compact in comparison to the applications of other top programs. With two short essays, the Broad application makes it more difficult for candidates to differentiate themselves from each other. As such, it is important that your baseline statistics (GMAT and GPA) are close to those of the current MBA class. This importance has been compounded as Broad looks to improve its baseline statistics in order to continue its movement up the rankings. Therefore, you should utilize the optional essay to address weaknesses in baseline statistics that are five percent below the means.

Overall, Broad is looking for bright candidates who aren't afraid to get their hands dirty while working to solve managerial issues. If you can position yourself as such and hit the mark in terms of GMAT and GPA, your application will resonate positively with the admissions committee.

Insider information

A few years ago, Broad grads received criticism for their lack of teamwork capabilities. The Broad administration was quick to react and has made strong efforts to introduce team building exercises into the learning model. Today, a large portion of class assignments are completed in teams. From the moment orientation begins, students are placed on project teams and students' skills are continuously enhanced through team building workshops and activities. As part of the core curriculum, students are required to take the course *Leadership & Teamwork*. This course provides students with an experiential learning opportunity through which they can work in teams under different simulated conditions. The bottom line is that you should present yourself to the admissions committee as a team player who is open to further examination of your team skills.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ Indiana University (Kelley).
- ☐ Purdue University (Krannert).
- ☐ University of Maryland (Smith).

New York University (Leonard N. Stern School of Business)

www.stern.nyu.edu

New York, NY

Application at a glance

Application due dates (first, second, third round): Dec. 1, Jan. 15, Mar. 15

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Three (two of two-pages, one “creative” piece involving words, illustrations, etc.).
- ☐ Interview: By invitation only.
- ☐ Recommendations: Two, with at least one preferably coming from a supervisor or coworker.
- ☐ Resume.
- ☐ Application fee: \$150.

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): Thomas F. Cooley (2002)

Admissions director: Julia Min

Program size: 858 full-time

Acceptance rate: 15 percent

Yield: 52 percent

Mean undergraduate GPA: 3.4

Mean GMAT: 700

Middle 80 percent GMAT: 650–750

Average years of work experience: 4.7

International: 34 percent

Women: 38 percent

Minority: 13 percent

Your Stern application strategy

The fact about NYU’s Stern School that comes up most often is its location. Stern sits right in New York City’s Greenwich Village, between Manhattan’s Midtown and Financial District. Students and grads rave about the school’s location, and the administration smartly plays up its ties to New York when promoting Stern.

Given Stern’s location, it is not surprising that a large number of grads pursue jobs on Wall Street, where the Stern name and alumni network are the strongest. Eight of the school’s top 10 recruiters are investment banks. Although Stern’s overall academic reputation is strong, most people consider its finance department to be by far the school’s greatest strength. If you are interested in working outside of finance, don’t rule out

Stern, but know that finance is where most of the action has historically been. The school is aware of this perceived inequity and has been working hard to balance its strengths across disciplines.

Although many would call Stern a finance school, its approach to management education is mostly a general one. First-year students go through a complete required curriculum of courses in all of the business fundamentals, with the bulk of elective coursework coming in the second year. Most students major in one or two of the school's 12 majors (including Finance, Economics, Marketing, and Operations), and some take a co-major or "program initiative." These latter two programs demonstrate Stern's generalist approach by involving faculty and courses from across the school's academic departments to teach specialized subjects such as Entrepreneurship, Digital Economy, and Law and Business.

Another way in which Stern's New York ties are apparent is in its teaching. The school boasts nearly 100 adjunct professors, many of whom are highly regarded veterans of the New York business community. Some of the bigger names who have taught as visiting professors at Stern include former Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker and Nobel laureate Robert Solow. The school prides itself on giving its students lessons with real-world applications, and part of this is letting students hear lessons straight from these veterans' mouths.

Stern also emphasizes the global orientation of its student body and its curriculum. A third of the class comes from abroad, and Stern offers an International Business co-major option for the many American students there who have some interest in working overseas. You don't need an international angle to your story when you apply to Stern, but at least acknowledging the importance of a globally-focused education should help your cause.

Stern works to cultivate and maintain a spirit of teamwork and cooperation among its students, who do a fair amount of work in groups. Students and grads sometimes comment that they were pleasantly surprised to find that the culture is more cooperative than they expected, especially given the "shark" reputation that bankers tend to have. If you apply to Stern, don't discount the importance of teamwork in your message. The school is less impressed by individual achievers than it is by well-grounded people who have excelled in their past jobs by working with others. Keep this in mind, especially if you are a banker who is looking to distinguish yourself from the pack.

With a yield in the low 50s, Stern gets stiff competition from the likes of Columbia and Wharton for finance-minded students. Showing the admissions committee that Stern really is where you want to be—and having convincing reasons for why this is the case—will greatly help your chances of being admitted.

Insider information

Although Stern's name is best known on Wall Street, the school is also serious about entrepreneurship. The school's Entrepreneurship and Innovation co-major is a popular choice, as is its Entertainment, Media, and Technology program initiative. Stern's annual Maximum Exposure Business Plan Competition gives budding entrepreneurs a chance to compete for cash prizes. Successful business plan teams are

matched with experienced entrepreneurs or venture capitalists who serve as mentors. This is an area of the program that the school continues to emphasize. If you consider yourself to be an entrepreneur, or you want to be one, be sure to let the Stern admissions committee know about it.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ Columbia Business School.
- ☐ University of Pennsylvania (Wharton).

Northwestern University (Kellogg School of Management)

www.kellogg.northwestern.edu

Evanston, IL

Application at a glance

Application due dates (first, second, third round): Nov. 8, Jan. 10, Mar. 14.

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Six (three of two pages, three short essays).
- ☐ Interview: Required.
- ☐ Recommendations: One “Career Progress Survey” to be completed by the applicant’s direct supervisor.
- ☐ Resume.
- ☐ Application fee: \$185.

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): Dipak Jain (2001)

Admissions director: Beth Flye

Program size: 1,250 full-time

Acceptance rate: 13 percent

Yield: 64 percent

Mean undergraduate GPA: 3.5

Mean GMAT: 700

Middle 80 percent GMAT: 660–750

Average years of work experience: 4.5

International: 33 percent

Women: 31 percent

Minority: 19 percent

Your Kellogg application strategy

The two words you will almost always hear when you mention Kellogg are “teamwork” and “marketing.” Donald Jacobs, the school’s dean from 1975 to 2001, is responsible for establishing the school as a top-ranked MBA program, and he did it largely on the strength of his philosophy that business managers can’t be effective without knowing how to successfully work in teams. Even though Jacobs is no longer involved in the day-to-day running of the school (he’s retained the title of Dean Emeritus), his approach is still very apparent in the school’s program and culture. Most homework assignments and projects are done in teams, and the school has recently instituted a Web-based peer review system called TeamNet, which students are required to use in some of their classes.

Marketing is the school’s other best-known strength, and much of the credit for that goes to Philip Kotler, who has written some of the best-known Marketing textbooks in the world. The rest of the Marketing faculty includes many other heavy-hitters who have distinguished themselves in their own right. All of this leads to heavy recruiting from companies looking for Marketing experts and brand managers.

Lost in the noise about Kellogg’s Marketing program is the fact that its other programs are also very strong. In fact, Marketing isn’t even the school’s most popular major; more Kellogg students study Finance than anything else. Although Kellogg’s curriculum is considered to be General Management in nature, students generally specialize in two or three fields.

The school also has noted faculty in areas such as Strategy and Managerial Economics. Just as Finance is a more popular major at Kellogg than Marketing, the biggest recruiters at the other top schools—McKinsey, Boston Consulting Group, Goldman Sachs, etc.—also do more hiring at Kellogg than the biggest marketing-related firms.

As you would expect, Kellogg’s admissions office looks for teamwork-oriented applicants. “Sharks” or hot shots need not apply. This doesn’t mean that Kellogg looks for 600 touchy-feely people each year, but rather, it looks for applicants who know how to get things done when working with others. Think of the “desert island test”—if you can think of someone whom you’d hate to be stranded with on an island, then Kellogg probably doesn’t want that person, either.

Maybe even more importantly, Kellogg looks for people who will get involved at the school. A distinguishing characteristic of Kellogg is that pretty much everything is student-run, from clubs to international study trips (“Global Initiatives in Management”) to professional conferences that the school hosts. Chances are that a student will even review your application. It’s not uncommon for a student to be involved in five or six different activities or clubs outside of the typical four-class schedule. What this means for you is that you need to demonstrate that you will get involved. The best way to do this is by showing what you’ve done in the past to get involved in your profession, school, and community. And less can be more: Instead of listing seven clubs that you once participated in while in college, focus on the one or two activities that you’re really passionate about and show exactly how you got involved in those activities and made a difference. The grid from Chapter 2 should help strengthen this important part of your application story.

Insider information

Although Kellogg is best known for its teamwork approach, the school is increasingly positioning itself less as a place where students learn to be team leaders, not merely team players. In other words, people who work well with others, but aren't just followers. The administration wants recruiters to come to Kellogg looking for their next generation of leaders, rather than for marketing or finance experts who are easy to get along with. That means that Kellogg is looking for more outstanding leaders in the applicant pool. To this end, think of personal examples of how you've led teams toward a goal in the past. Most applicants will just think about teamwork in terms of how they helped others accomplish a goal, but show the admissions committee how you led a team to success and you'll be in great shape.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ Duke University (Fuqua).
- ☐ University of Michigan Business School.

Purdue University (Krannert Graduate School of Management)

www.mgmt.purdue.edu

West Lafayette, IN

Application at a glance

U.S. citizen and permanent resident application due dates (first, second, and third round): Nov. 1, Jan. 1, May. 15.

International student application due dates (first and second round): Dec. 1, Feb. 1.

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Three (two of 500 words, one of 100 words).
- ☐ Interview: By invitation only.
- ☐ Recommendations: Two, with one preferably coming from a direct supervisor.
- ☐ Resume.
- ☐ Application fee: \$55.

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): Richard A. Cosier (1999)

Admissions director: Ward Snearly

Program size: 400 full-time

Acceptance rate: 30 percent

Yield: 45 percent

Mean GPA: 3.2

Mean GMAT: 651

Middle 80 percent GMAT: 590–730

Average years of work experience: 4.0

International: 36 percent

Women: 23 percent

Minority: 16 percent

Your Krannert application strategy

Originally positioned as a graduate program in operations, Krannert changed its degree title from Masters of Science in Management to MBA in 2001. The new label made official the expansion of the program, which occurred over several years. Today Krannert is recognized as an MBA program with strengths in technology, manufacturing, and other analytical functions. The school is looking for applicants who can thrive within a quantitatively intense environment, support its traditional strengths, and also continue building its brand in other aspects of business. At heart, Krannert is still a quantitatively centered program, so you should display some proficiency in this area through your GMAT score, transcript(s), or professional experiences.

It's not surprising to hear Krannert MBAs refer to their alma mater as "Techno MBA," as the program regularly utilizes technology to support its hands-on learning philosophy. Many students choose to specialize in Information Systems, one of six functional specializations the school offers (the others are: Accounting, Finance, Marketing, Operations Management, and Strategic Management). In addition to functional specializations, the school offers interdisciplinary concentrations in International Management, General Management, and Manufacturing and Technology Management. Discussion of your goals should include a small blurb on where you see one or two of these specializations coming into play.

Technology is used to simulate e-commerce transactions, the power of enterprise application integration, financial trading, and database architecture. In addition to these examples, Krannert provides numerous opportunities for its students to translate theory into application. The Student-Managed Investment Fund (SMIF) provides students with the opportunity to help manage a six-figure financial portfolio and distribute a portion of the gains to Krannert and other graduate programs. During the Digital Information Industry Simulation, students act as the CEO of a large technology company, making decisions that have an impact on the results of the company. Krannert also offers MarkStrat3, another computer simulation that allows student teams to compete against one another, trying to win market share and increase profits in the high-tech industry. Providing an example in which you took an abstract idea and implemented it is a powerful way to highlight your fit with Krannert's philosophy on translating theory into application.

Given Krannert's strong technology focus, it is important that you display familiarity and comfort with technology. This doesn't mean that you have to come across as a techno wiz, but to the extent that you are at ease with discussing the benefits of technology and sharing ideas of technological innovation, you should do so. Keep in mind, however, that Krannert is also trying to expand its brand beyond just technology and

operations, so don't shy away from bringing up interests in other aspects of business. Telling a story about how you would like to apply tech-savvy business principles to industries outside of traditional technology can also help your application stand out.

Krannert provides all of the benefits that come along with most small MBA programs, including accessible faculty, a close-knit student community and an emphasis on teamwork. Immediately after beginning the program, you will be assigned to a four- or five-person team. Students within a team come from diverse professional backgrounds and spend time working on group assignments for the first eight weeks of class. Having strong team skills is important to succeeding in these groups, and is therefore something upon which the admission committee will rate you. Use the essays to discuss your ability to contribute to a team.

Insider information

One of the areas that Krannert is actively looking to expand in is its global presence. The program already receives a large number of applications from international candidates (70–80 percent of all applications) and maintains a large number of international students (generally more than 1/3 of students). Krannert is looking to leverage its popularity among international candidates and offer more opportunities abroad. One international program the school is actively promoting is the German International Graduate School of Management and Administration (GISMA) program. This program features an eight-week module in Hannover, Germany, during which students take classes taught by Krannert faculty and visit German companies. To the extent that you have global aspirations, be sure to highlight them in your application. Doing so should benefit your fit with the school.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ Carnegie Mellon University.
- ☐ Michigan State University (Broad).
- ☐ Indiana University (Kelley).

Stanford University Graduate School of Business

www.gsb.stanford.edu

Stanford, CA

Application at a glance

Application due dates (first, second, and third round): Oct. 30, Jan. 8, Mar. 19.

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Two (both of unlimited length).
- ☐ Interview: By invitation only.
- ☐ Recommendations: Three—two should come from people who are familiar with your professional capabilities and at least one of which from a

direct supervisor. One letter from a peer with whom you have worked on a team or a project (can be professional, extracurricular, charitable, or otherwise). Academic recommendations are discouraged.

- ☐ Resume.
- ☐ Application fee: \$200.

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): Robert Joss (1999)
Admissions director: Derrick Bolton
Program size: 730 full-time
Acceptance rate: 8 percent
Yield: 80 percent (estimate)
Mean GPA: 3.6 (estimate)
Mean GMAT: 725 (estimate)
Middle 80 percent GMAT: 665–765 (estimate)
Average years of work experience: 4.7
International: 32 percent
Women: 37 percent
Minority: 27 percent (estimate)

Your Stanford application strategy

The instructions to Stanford's application indicate that it evaluates candidates based on three high-level criteria: "demonstrated leadership potential, strong academic aptitude, and contributions to the diversity of the Stanford community." Sounds simple enough, right? The difficulty with navigating the Stanford application is the degree to which these three criteria must be emphasized. In demonstrating your fit with these criteria your emphasis should primarily be on the innovation and leadership dimensions.

The most obvious example of Stanford's alignment with innovation is its strength in entrepreneurship. Closely linked with Silicon Valley, Stanford has achieved an entrepreneurship branding that other b-schools dream of. While Stanford is a general management program to its core (students do not select majors), electives based on entrepreneurship are in abundance. Courses that focus on areas such as venture capital, business model development, private equity, and entrepreneurial strategy are the backbone of Stanford's entrepreneurial strength. Discussing your entrepreneurial inclination can be a great way to unite the innovation and leadership dimensions, but it should not be done to simply appear as though you fit with Stanford's values. Recognize that a large percentage of applicants who apply to Stanford will discuss entrepreneurship in their application. Therefore, should you go down this path, include vivid details about your ideas and also be sure to discuss their potential impact on society. This will help separate you from the pack.

Recommendations should be viewed as an extremely important aspect of your Stanford application. The admission committee will take a close look at your recommendations in evaluating your leadership potential and your teamwork capabilities. If there is one application in which you should avoid submitting generic recommendations at all costs, this is it. Make sure that you follow the instructions closely and submit two professional recommendations and one peer recommendation.

Academic aptitude is a criterion that Stanford evaluates more rigorously than most other top b-schools. Because the curriculum is quantitatively heavy, the admissions committee will look closely for measures that indicate that you will be able to succeed within the learning model. Therefore, your GMAT score will be looked at closely in addition to your transcript(s). If your scores don't reflect a high standard of analytical background, you will need to express it through your professional experiences and/or additional coursework. You should also be aware that while those accepted by Stanford come from a multitude of undergraduate institutions, a large majority attended "high prestige" universities. If you are not among this group, you should discuss your school's strengths and your reasons for attending it.

While Stanford's emphasis on teamwork may not be as strong as it is at Fuqua, Kellogg, or Tuck, it is definitely an important part of the learning model. During their first quarter at Stanford, students are assigned to study groups of four to five people and work together on a daily basis. You can display a penchant for working with others by discussing previous professional and extracurricular team involvement.

The essay portion of the application is your opportunity to demonstrate your ability to contribute to the diversity of the Stanford community. Because the Stanford essays do not have a word limit, you should really focus on telling your unique story, but doing so in a logical, flowing manner. Include headings in your essays so that your readers can follow your framework easily. Consider writing your Stanford essays after you've completed other applications. This will allow your story to be more polished. And don't even bother trying to shoehorn an essay from another application into your Stanford application. Ultimately, your essays should reveal your passions, both professional and personal, and highlight your distinctiveness. You probably haven't scaled Mt. Everest or won a marathon, but don't let that keep you from positioning yourself as unique in some way. One applicant we spoke with, who was denied admission after her interview, mentioned that the alumnus with whom she interviewed suggested that her lack of distinctiveness contributed to her ultimate denial. "He complimented my competitive profile, but stated that I had no point of differentiation in my perspective, which weakened an otherwise strong profile."

You can assert a distinct passion for Stanford by visiting the school, checking out a class, and chatting with current students (yes, this goes for those of you on the East Coast too). Make sure that this visit finds its way into your essays in your discussion of "why Stanford?" Your enthusiasm for Stanford will resonate positively with the admissions committee as it strives to maintain a high yield percentage.

Insider information

The Stanford learning model doesn't offer majors, but it does offer certificates in public management and global management. The Public Management Program (PMP)

prepares students for positions in the social sector and the Global Management Program (GMP) prepares students for opportunities at a global level. Both certificates are supported by a large number of electives, programs, and career resources. More than one third of the student body pursues certificates in PMP or GMP, and Stanford is actively looking for ways in which it can augment these programs. Discussing how you would utilize the resources offered by these programs in conjunction with your career objectives is a great way to display fit with Stanford.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ MIT (Sloan).
- ☐ UCLA (Anderson).

University of California at Berkeley (Haas School of Business)

www.haas.berkeley.edu

Berkeley, CA

Application at a glance

Application due dates (first, second, third, and fourth round): Nov. 1, Dec. 13, Jan. 31, Mar. 14.

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Eight (seven short essays, one of 500 words).
- ☐ Interview: By invitation only.
- ☐ Recommendations: Two, both should come from people who are familiar with your professional capabilities.
- ☐ Resume.
- ☐ Application fee: \$150.

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): Tom Campbell (2002)

Admissions director: Ilse Evans

Program size: 480 full-time

Acceptance rate: 11 percent

Yield: 48 percent

Mean GPA: 3.6

Mean GMAT: 703

Middle 80 percent GMAT: 650–760

Average years of work experience: 5.2

International: 34 percent

Women: 30 percent

Minority: 22 percent

Your Haas application strategy

In a world filled with business schools, Haas maintains a high degree of distinction. That distinction can be seen just by reading through the Haas essays, which at times seem more like questions from a psychologist rather than from an admissions committee. Indeed, the essay questions are indicative of a school that is serious about admitting applicants who can maintain almost paradoxical balances—applicants who are committed to traditional business learning, but display a bit of personal panache. Applicants who would be willing to stand alone based on personal conviction, but are willing to unite in the name of teamwork. Applicants who are looking to make waves in the marketplace, but remain cognizant of social and ethical responsibilities. If you can paint a picture of yourself that reflects these traits, in addition to satisfying the more common admissions requirements, then you stand a good chance of being accepted into the Haas family.

The Haas learning model continues to emphasize three main themes: Entrepreneurship and Innovation, Management of Technology, and International Business Management. For the last several years, Haas has benefited from a symbiotic relationship with nearby Silicon Valley. This has resulted, not surprisingly, in an intensified focus on entrepreneurship. Haas now boasts multiple opportunities for students to cultivate and test their business ideas as well as to interact with mentors and experts. The Lester Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, founded in 1991, supports a variety of activities such as the Berkeley Business Incubator, UC Berkeley Entrepreneurs Forum, and entrepreneurship fellowships and internships.

Technology has also been a natural outgrowth of Haas' geographical location. The Management of Technology Program offers a number of opportunities including courses such as Strategic Computing and Communication Technology, Information Technology Strategy, and International Trade and Competition in High Technology. The program also features research initiatives, and the annual Leading Edge Technology Conference.

The final theme, International Business Management, is highlighted in Haas' course offerings in addition to its International Business Development (IBD) and International Exchange programs. IBD offers students the opportunity to participate in a global consulting project with a team composed entirely of Haas students. In terms of exchange programs, Haas offers six in locations such as London, Barcelona, and Hong Kong.

Although the Haas learning model is rooted in general management precepts, students can obtain certificates in any one of the three themes in addition to Corporate Environmental Management and Health Management. Displaying an understanding of these themes and how they would benefit you should be a critical part of your application.

Demonstrating the teamwork dimension is also important, as Haas admissions counselors are actively looking for applicants who display team spirit. The learning model promotes a cooperative, intimate environment in which students participate in multiple group assignments and interact closely with faculty. To demonstrate fit with these characteristics, you should display a pattern of getting involved and a sense of community.

The Haas learning model has a strong bent towards applying abstract theories to real-world situations. This approach begins with the faculty, a majority of whom have significant experience within the marketplace, and extends to the students, who boast an average of 5.2 years of work experience. The maturity dimension is highly valued at Haas and gaining acceptance with under three years of work experience can be challenging. As an applicant, you should try to display a diversity of experience and insight into how complex issues such as globalization, ethics, environmentalism, and politics impact business operations.

Insider information

As other business schools scramble to revamp their programs in order to promote a new focus on ethics and social responsibility, Haas will benefit from its reputation as a pioneer in the field. With a required course in ethics, numerous electives, programs, and events focused on the topic, Haas gives full treatment to the interaction of business, ethics, and social responsibility. The National Social Venture Business Plan Competition is a hallmark of that interaction, as business schools across the country compete for a total of \$100,000 by presenting plans that outline business propositions that have a societal or environmental component. Although a majority of Haas grads pursue careers in the traditional areas of consulting and finance, they all are all influenced by Haas' incorporation of social issues within the learning model. As you present your profile, make sure that you reflect a cognizance of societal and ethical issues that extend from business issues.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ Duke University (Fuqua).
- ☐ UCLA (Anderson).
- ☐ USC (Marshall).
- ☐ Yale School of Management.

University of California at Los Angeles (Anderson Graduate School of Management)

www.anderson.ucla.edu

Los Angeles, CA

Application at a glance

Application due dates (first, second, third, and fourth round): Nov. 6, Dec. 27, Jan. 30, Apr. 4.

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Four (500–1,000 words each).
- ☐ Interview: Recommended.

- ☐ Recommendations: Two, both should come from people who are familiar with your professional capabilities and one preferably from your direct supervisor.
- ☐ Resume.
- ☐ Application fee: \$150.

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): Bruce Willison (1999)

Admissions director: Linda Baldwin

Program size: 520 full-time

Acceptance rate: 15 percent

Yield: 52 percent

Mean GPA: 3.6

Mean GMAT: 710

Middle 80 percent GMAT: 650–750

Average years of work experience: 4.7

International: 23 percent

Women: 27 percent

Minority: 19 percent

Your Anderson application strategy

Sun, beach, entertainment management program—while Anderson definitely has these assets that few other MBA programs can match, it also excels in the traditional areas that are valued by applicants. The Anderson program offers a general management curriculum that allows students to select from specializations in 11 areas or even create their own specialization. The specializations cover a wide range of topics including Finance, Marketing, Entrepreneurial Studies, Information Systems, Real Estate, and Accounting. In support of its flexible general management learning model, Anderson is in search of candidates who display a unique balance of leadership and teamwork capabilities.

Anderson views leadership in three basic ways. First, it recognizes leaders for their ability to convey strategic direction and vision to others. Vision allows for the unification of the group behind a common goal. Second, Anderson views leaders as problem-solvers who apply their analytical and communication skills to overcome challenges. Finally, Anderson defines leaders as people who cultivate the first two capabilities in others. Anderson does not view leadership and teamwork in separate spheres and therefore notes that the best leaders are also the best team players. The Anderson learning model provides students with opportunities to improve their balance of leadership and teamwork skills through team simulations, team-building exercises, analytical models, and projects. Your challenge is to display fit with Anderson's definition of leadership. One of the best places to do that is in answering the essay questions. Try to provide an example that shows your leadership skills along the lines of the three definitions.

Anderson's entrepreneurship program has served, in many ways, as the model for many other business schools. The program offers a blend of coursework, entrepreneurial resources, and "hands-on" opportunities. At the core of Anderson's entrepreneurship program is the Price Center. The Price Center provides support for the development of course materials, research, and experiential opportunities. One such opportunity, the Knapp Venture Competition, is a traditional business plan contest, through which participants can win venture capital funding. The Venture Fellows Program and the Student Investment Fund—two competitive programs that students must apply for—expose participants to venture capital and investment management activities. Students can also gain exposure to new ventures through the Wolfen Award, which calls for selected students to complete a feasibility study on a start-up as part of an internship. Because of Anderson's strength in entrepreneurship, discussing your own entrepreneurial inclination can be a great way to display fit with the school and to differentiate yourself based on your unique ideas.

Anderson is also often recognized for its leading technology programs. It was one of the first business schools to integrate a wireless network throughout its facilities and often receives praise for its use of technology in the classroom. If you are interested in technology, you will find a number of interesting courses and opportunities in which to participate. Similar in its function to the Price Center, the Center for Management in the Information Economy provides resources to faculty in their research on how technology is impacting the business environment.

Despite Anderson's low acceptance rate and its great reputation, the school has a relatively low yield percentage. The school is looking for improvement in that area and will evaluate applicants closely to see if they are really committed to Anderson or are just applying to diversify risk. Along those lines, establishing fit is extremely important. You are given an explicit opportunity to show that Anderson is your top pick in its essays. Be sure to capitalize on that opportunity by displaying intimate knowledge of the program and then go the extra step by explaining how you would get involved in school activities to further bolster Anderson's reputation.

Insider information

A unique aspect of the Anderson learning model is the Applied Management Research Project. This six month project is the last requirement of the MBA program and follows in line with Anderson's perspective on leadership, teamwork, and applied learning. The projects are completed in teams of three to five and generally consist of a strategic consulting assignment or the development of a business venture idea. In either case, students are able to apply their entire Anderson toolkit in a comprehensive manner. Discussing your interest in this project—and more generally, in the hands-on learning opportunities that Anderson offers—during your interview or in your application is another good way to show fit.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ Stanford University.
- ☐ University of California at Berkeley (Haas).
- ☐ USC (Marshall).

University of Chicago Graduate School of Business ***gsb.uchicago.edu*** **Chicago, IL**

Application at a glance

Application due dates (first, second, third round): Nov. 8, Jan. 8, Mar. 21.

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Three (two of 750 words, one of 500 words).
- ☐ Interview: Strongly recommended.
- ☐ Recommendations: Two, both should come from people who are familiar with your professional capabilities.
- ☐ Resume.
- ☐ Application fee: \$200.

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): Edward A. Snyder (2001)

Admissions director: Don Martin

Program size: 1,169 full-time

Acceptance rate: 15 percent

Yield: 67 percent

Mean undergraduate GPA: 3.4

Mean GMAT: 687

Middle 80 percent GMAT: 610–750

Average years of work experience: 4.4

International: 31 percent

Women: 31 percent

Minority: 7 percent

Your University of Chicago application strategy

The University of Chicago Graduate School of Business (GSB) has long had a reputation as a great business school, and it has only grown in stature since Edward Snyder moved into the Dean's office in 2001.

Snyder and his administration have worked hard to promote the GSB's strengths while addressing its perceived weaknesses. Its strengths are impressive, including the school's notable roster of Nobel laureate faculty members—six as of last count, more than any other school—its high number of well-placed alumni, its strong international brand name, and its top-flight reputation with recruiters. As for weaknesses, in addition to its reputation for appealing mainly to quantitative jocks, the school has also faced a perception that GSB students are somewhat less involved in the school than

those at other top programs, partly a result of the school having to compete with all that Chicago has to offer.

The school has improved its reputation through a variety of programs. A grade-nondisclosure policy, put in place in 2000, has taken the edge off of grade competition. Leadership Effectiveness and Development (LEAD), a mandatory course for first-year students, helps students develop their leadership, teamwork, and communication skills. The school has also branched out beyond finance, emphasizing the strength of its marketing and general management programs, among others. Additionally, Snyder has made a strong push to augment the Chicago GSB community on campus, which remains an ongoing campaign for the school. Given that, the school will continue to look for applicants who demonstrate a willingness to get involved with meaningful extracurricular activities, maybe even more so than other top business schools. Therefore, be sure that your Chicago GSB application emphasizes your leadership and involvement in past endeavors.

One part of the school's reputation that is unlikely to change is its rigorous academic program. No matter what attributes the school tries to instill in its graduates, it is unlikely that it will lessen its emphases on hard finance and quantitative skills. Finance is still the most popular major, followed by Strategy, Accounting, and Marketing (13 majors are offered). One aspect of the curriculum that students love is its flexibility. LEAD is the only required course in the entire program, with students choosing from a menu of courses to satisfy their core curriculum needs. This level of flexibility truly sets Chicago apart from other business school learning models. Electives include "lab" classes, such as the school's New Product and Strategy Development lab, which gives students an opportunity to take on consulting projects for real companies. Keep this flexibility in mind as you think about how you might fit with the Chicago GSB program. This type of environment suits someone with a strong career focus better than it does a student who is still trying to figure out what he wants to do after business school.

The bottom line is that the school will always take its academics very seriously, and you'll need to communicate that you have the brainpower to keep up, regardless of your academic or professional background. Doing well on the quantitative section of the GMAT will help you a lot here. However, the school is very serious about turning out well-rounded leaders, and this starts by admitting well-rounded applicants who will get involved. If you believe that you can handle the rigorous curriculum, demonstrating that you have polish as well as brains will go a long way toward getting you into Chicago GSB.

Insider information

Chicago GSB's quantitative-heavy reputation has traditionally meant that it attracted a high proportion of people who fit well with the school's learning model. On one hand, the school attracted a less diverse applicant pool than other top schools, but on the other, it knew that a majority of applicants would be a good fit. Now, the school's resurgence in the national rankings means that it may start to attract a broader applicant pool, some of whom may not really be a great fit with the school, or may not even know why they want to attend Chicago GSB other than because it's ranked higher than most other programs. The school's challenge will be to figure out who really belongs at the school. Concentrate on standing out from the pack by emphasizing your fit with the

program, ideally by demonstrating some intellectual horsepower as well as the traits of the well-rounded applicant whom the school is looking for.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ Carnegie Mellon University.
- ☐ Columbia Business School.
- ☐ MIT (Sloan).
- ☐ University of Rochester (Simon).

University of London (London Business School)

www.london.edu

London, UK

Application at a glance

Application due dates (first, second, third, fourth round): Nov. 8, Jan. 3, Feb. 28, May 2.

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Seven (three of 50–200 words, four of 500 words).
- ☐ Interview: By invitation only.
- ☐ Recommendations: Two, both should come from people who are in a position to comment on your suitability for the LBS program. LBS values both professional and educational references.
- ☐ Resume.
- ☐ Application fee: £120 or U.S. \$180.

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): Laura D'Andrea Tyson (2002)

Admissions director: David Simpson

Program size: 500 full-time

Acceptance rate: 19 percent

Yield: 58 percent

Mean GPA: N/A

Mean GMAT: 690

Middle 80 percent GMAT: 640–740

Average years of work experience: 5.5

International: 85 percent (foreign nationals)

Women: 26 percent

Minority: N/A

Your University of London application strategy

Looking for a truly international MBA experience? Most other business schools' international immersion claims pale in comparison to what London Business School (LBS) offers. Incoming students can expect that 80–85 percent of their classmates will hail from countries outside of the UK. That representation tallies up to more than 70 nations in total. Combine that with a language proficiency requirement that calls for students to have a reasonable fluency in at least two languages (including English) and exchange programs with 30 business schools abroad, and you have the makings of an environment that encourages a fluid multicultural dialogue. Indeed, “becoming an international citizen” is one of four themes that LBS's program expresses. The admissions committee will be looking closely to see what type of international citizen you will be, so be prepared to discuss your international and cross-cultural experiences. You can expect a good portion of your interview to be dedicated to this subject.

In addition to demonstrating that you have the ability to be an international citizen, you should also make sure to display fit with the other three LBS learning themes: becoming a leader, becoming an independent thinker, and making things happen. These themes should not be viewed in disparate silos, but rather as intertwined objectives. LBS views leadership in three different ways: being competent and confident across a wide range of functions, being creative and flexible in your leadership style, and achieving results. Think of professional and personal examples that display these leadership characteristics and try to integrate as many of them as you can into your essays.

One of the ways that LBS believes your leadership abilities will be enhanced during the MBA program is through team opportunities. Immediately after beginning the program you will be assigned to a study group of six to seven classmates, in which you will tackle a multitude of group assignments. The emphasis on teamwork is so strong that these group projects are worth approximately 50 percent of students' overall first year grade. In addition to participating in a study group there is an expectation that students will also play leading roles in at least one of LBS's 50 club opportunities. In sum, these experiences allow students to enhance the three LBS leadership characteristics, while cultivating their team skills. To show your willingness to get involved, you might want to pick a couple club opportunities that interest you and mention them in your essays.

Becoming an independent thinker highlights LBS's desire to develop not only business leaders, but also to a certain extent, thought leaders. This is underscored by the fact that LBS is one of the only business schools that has its faculty conduct a majority of interviews. Given this type of interview, it is to your advantage to acquaint yourself even more than usual with the curriculum. LBS is also one of the few business schools that values recommendations that are written by professors. The interactive LBS learning model benefits most when students have a high regard for the classroom dynamic and for academic preparation. Discussing your view of academics and how it has played a role in your outlook is a great way to display your stance as an “independent thinker.” Ultimately, LBS expects its students to take the academic theories learned in the classroom and “make things happen.”

The “making things happen” theme, a mixture of innovation and implementation, is often expressed through entrepreneurial ventures. The combination of the Foundation for Entrepreneurial Management, Sussex Place Investment Management, and the Gavron Business Centre serve as a business incubator and a capital fund from which students can access valuable capital and resources. Students can also opt to participate in the school’s Entrepreneurship Summer School, which allows participants to develop and test business plans through their early stages. At the end of the experience, students present the results of feasibility studies to expert panels for feedback. Participants are then encouraged to further hone their business plans throughout their second year. If you have entrepreneurial ambitions, make sure to bring it out in your application.

Insider information

One of the centerpieces of the LBS learning model is its Shadowing Project. As part of the project, first-year students are assigned to a manager for a week and are required to observe that manager’s approach to leadership, challenges, and colleague interaction. At the end of the week, students record their observations and reflect on the implications those observations have on their professional development. This reflective nature is something that LBS looks closely for in its applicants; the thought being that reflection produces maturity. Indeed, the LBS learning model suggests that the four themes cannot be achieved without reflection. It is therefore imperative that you demonstrate a thoughtful nature in discussing your past experiences. Describing personal discoveries that you gathered from activities and events is a good way to do so.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ Columbia Business School.
- ☐ INSEAD.
- ☐ University of Pennsylvania (Wharton).

University of Maryland (Robert H. Smith School of Business)

www.rhsmith.umd.edu

College Park, MD

Application at a glance

Application due dates (International Early, Domestic Early, International Final, Domestic Final): Nov. 15, Dec. 2, Feb. 15, May 1.

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Three (one of two pages, two of one page).
- ☐ Interview: By invitation only.
- ☐ Recommendations: Three required.
- ☐ Resume.
- ☐ Application fee: \$50.

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): Howard Frank (1997)

Admissions director: Sabrina White

Program size: 420 full-time

Acceptance rate: 23 percent

Yield: 52 percent

Mean undergraduate GPA: 3.4

Mean GMAT: 655

Middle 80 percent GMAT: 610–710

Average years of work experience: 5.2

International: 33 percent

Women: 34 percent

Minority: 14 percent

Your Smith application strategy

Smith has made a name for itself among business schools for its emphasis on technology. The school's core curriculum works information technology lessons into nearly every one of its classes, and students can tailor their general management education to concentrate in topics including electronic commerce, e-service, information systems, and supply chain management.

One tangible example of the school's technology focus is its Netcentricity Laboratory, or "Net Lab," which Smith has built as a proving ground and learning environment for functions including e-commerce and supply chain management. Students use models and simulations to learn the nuances of these systems in a series of e-business lab courses. The lab is sponsored by industry heavyweights including Oracle, Sun, and Reuters, and features their technologies prominently. The Net Lab also contains a Financial Markets Lab—modeled after a Wall Street trading floor—which gives students a chance to apply what they learn in the classroom to real-time financial decisions. Naturally, the more you can speak with passion about the importance of technology in your career path, the better fit you will demonstrate in your Smith application.

Speaking of Wall Street, the school also has a real-money portfolio called the Mayer Fund, which is run by 10–12 second-year Smith students. Founded in 1993, the fund gives students a chance to manage a portfolio worth more than \$1 million. The fund is a great chance for aspiring money managers to get their feet wet and gain exposure to the top executives who make up the fund's external board of directors. If you are interested in finance, consider discussing your interest in the Financial Markets Lab or the Mayer Fund in your application.

Another example of hands-on learning at Smith is its MBA Consulting Project, a required course for all second-year students. Teams of students work to earn credit toward their MBA while consulting for major corporations and government agencies. This is a unique feature of the Smith MBA and one that the school feels sets it apart.

Even if you're not interested in consulting, make sure that you demonstrate enthusiasm for the real-world lessons that this program provides. In fact, if you're not a consultant, emphasizing the appeal of this program may help your application stand out even more, as long as it's consistent with the rest of your story.

Smith students and grads describe the school's culture as being very cooperative. Teamwork figures into a lot of what students do, both in traditional classes and the school's Experiential Learning Modules that augment students' skills in areas such as communications and strategic business analysis. Accordingly, be sure to frame your past successes as instances of team success wherever possible in order to demonstrate fit with the program. And while leadership isn't talked about as much at Smith as at other schools, any examples you can provide to bolster your leadership dimension will help you stand out from the pack.

Like other schools with lower yield percentages, Smith is careful about selecting candidates who are truly interested in its program. Demonstrating your knowledge of the school, and especially your enthusiasm for its focus on technology and entrepreneurship, will help you make your case that Smith is where you want to be.

Insider information

Smith is very committed to entrepreneurship, and its Dingman Center for Entrepreneurship is a major hub for start-up activity in the Washington, D.C., region, giving entrepreneurs access to experienced mentors and potential investors. If you are serious about entrepreneurship, look closely at the school's Dingman and Lamone Scholarships. Students are selected based on their entrepreneurship experience, desire to start a business after business school, and their start-up ideas. They receive personal mentoring and business plan advice from experienced entrepreneurs in the Dingman Center. In exchange, Dingman and Lamone Scholars volunteer at the center, offering their own advice to others and running educational seminars in entrepreneurship and networking. Think about this program if you plan on starting your own business, especially on the East Coast, where Dingman's reputation is strongest.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ Indiana University (Kelley).
- ☐ Michigan State University (Broad).
- ☐ Vanderbilt University (Owen).

University of Michigan Business School

www.bus.umich.edu

Ann Arbor, MI

Application at a glance

Application due dates (first, second, and third round): Nov. 1, Jan. 7, Mar. 1.

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Four of two pages each.
- ☐ Interview: Highly recommended.
- ☐ Recommendations: Two—Suggest that both come from a direct supervisor, employer, or someone who is familiar with your professional capabilities.
- ☐ Resume.
- ☐ Application fee: \$125.

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): Robert Dolan (2001)

Admissions director: Kris Nebel

Program size: 860 full-time

Acceptance rate: 19 percent

Yield: 57 percent

Mean GPA: 3.4

Mean GMAT: 682

Middle 80 percent GMAT: 630–730

Average years of work experience: 5.0

International: 29 percent

Women: 28 percent

Minority: 20 percent

Your University of Michigan application strategy

The key to getting accepted into the University of Michigan Business School (UMBS) is to demonstrate balance across the four dimensions (leadership, innovation, teamwork, maturity) throughout your application. Regardless of the application component(s) in which you emphasize these dimensions, they should each make a couple appearances. It is imperative, therefore, that you take time to analyze your strengths and weaknesses for each of the dimensions before beginning the UMBS application.

UMBS is consistently recognized for its innovation and its focus on applying business principles to real-world scenarios. Both of these attributes are integrated in the learning model along with a solid dose of general management courses. A good example of this combination is UMBS's Multidisciplinary Action Project (MAP). Students are required to work on teams in completing a seven-week project for companies pre-selected by UMBS. The projects are highly analytical and allow students to apply the skills they learned in the classroom to a variety of companies. For those who have inclinations that are more international or entrepreneurial in nature, UMBS offers its IMAP and EMAP programs. The latest example of UMBS's application-based learning is The Tozzi Center. The Tozzi Electronic Business and Finance Center features a trading floor, an elliptical classroom, and a computer laboratory. The trading floor allows for dedicated, real-time access to the global markets. It is used for a multitude of

financial class exercises and student projects. Having and displaying knowledge of these types of programs should be a major component of your UMBS application process.

Demonstrating the ability to apply business principles in a rational manner is especially important. Recruiters repeatedly complement UMBS grads on their practical approach, which has been a large reason for UMBS's success in the business school rankings. One applicant, who was recently accepted, displayed a practical approach by explaining how she identified a neglected growth opportunity within her business segment. The applicant took initiative by creating a marketing plan that focused on the opportunity and was able to see her idea through to implementation. These are the types of applicants UMBS seeks.

Given UMBS's focus on professional excellence, it is not surprising to see that accepted students have an average of five years of work experience. This should not discourage applicants with less professional work experience, but recognize that UMBS will especially want to know how you can contribute to the program if you have less than three years of work experience. You should anticipate being questioned on this point during your interview.

Almost all activities at UMBS are team based, so check your ego before beginning the application. Providing one or two examples of your teamwork capabilities should go a long way toward establishing fit with the program.

Overall, if you meet the baseline criteria, express the four dimensions, display knowledge about the learning model and exhibit passion for the school, you should be in a much better position to receive an acceptance letter from UMBS.

Insider information

Over time, entrepreneurship has received greater attention at UMBS and it is now a major aspect of the learning model. The school has vast resources for aspiring entrepreneurs, such as the Samuel Zell-Robert H. Lurie Institute for Entrepreneurial Studies, which supports students as they explore their own business plans and start-up ideas. UMBS will continue to expand its support of entrepreneurial activities because it produces a virtuous cycle. Successful ventures led by students reflect positively on the curriculum, thereby attracting more potential students.

The UMBS application process allows for ample opportunity to discuss innovative entrepreneurial ideas and those opportunities should be capitalized on. That is not to say that all applicants should be aspiring entrepreneurs, but to the extent that you can display entrepreneurial spirit, do so. That spirit can be expressed through an idea for a new business or through an idea for your current company. The admissions committee will certainly take notice of your penchant for entrepreneurship and hopefully recognize your ability to augment the UMBS brand. Being recognized as a potential brand builder is a great way to move your application into the "yes" pile.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ Cornell University (Johnson).
- ☐ Duke University (Fuqua).

- ☐ Northwestern University (Kellogg).
- ☐ USC (Marshall).

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
(Kenan-Flagler Business School)
www.kenanflagler.unc.edu
Chapel Hill, NC

Application at a glance

Application due dates (first, second, third round): Nov. 22, Jan. 31, Apr. 4.

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Three of two pages each.
- ☐ Interview: Applicant-initiated until mid-December. After mid-December, by invitation only.
- ☐ Recommendations: Two, at least one should come from a direct supervisor.
- ☐ Resume.
- ☐ Application fee: \$100.

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): Robert S. Sullivan (1998)

Admissions director: Sherry Wallace

Program size: 554 full-time

Acceptance rate: 30 percent

Yield: 46 percent

Mean GPA: 3.2

Mean GMAT: 680

Middle 80 percent GMAT: 640–710

Average years of work experience: 5.2

International: 27 percent

Women: 30 percent

Minority: 16 percent

Your Kenan-Flagler application strategy

Over the last several years, Kenan-Flagler has made great strides in establishing its name among the top business schools. With an intense focus on analytics, leadership and teamwork, and a small-program culture, Kenan-Flagler has grown in popularity among applicants and recruiters. The learning model features an integrated general management curriculum that focuses on four themes: Analyzing Capabilities and Resources, Monitoring the Marketplace and External Environment, Formulating Strategy, and

Implementing Strategy and Assessing Firm Performance. These themes are featured in four corresponding eight-week modules, taken during the first year.

During the second year, students can select from seven “career concentrations” (Corporate Finance, Customer and Product Development, Investment Management, Global Supply-chain Management, Management Consulting, Real Estate, Entrepreneurship, and Venture Development). Students can supplement these career concentrations with “enrichment concentrations” in Sustainable Enterprise, International Business, or Electronic Business and Digital Commerce. As their names indicate, these concentrations are more oriented toward career development than traditional functions. This is indicative of a learning model that prides itself on having close ties to industry development. Those close ties are supported by having a corporate advisory board, comprised of experts from top companies, that provides guidance on the concentrations’ curricula. In addition to serving on the board, these experts also provide students with career advice and job opportunities. To fit well with its focus on career development, Kenan-Flagler looks for applicants who are strong in the maturity dimension. The school discourages those with less than two years work experience from applying and takes a close look at applicants’ professional records in search of tangible achievements.

Analytics plays a large role in the Kenan-Flagler learning model and therefore in the applicant selection process. The program is known for its quantitative rigor, so if you have a relatively low quantitative GMAT score and a weak quantitative background, you should consider taking a couple extra courses in economics, statistics, or financial accounting. Like many other schools, Kenan-Flagler has an analytical workshop that students can attend before classes start, but taking initiative to shore up your quantitative skills will show the admissions committee that you will be able to succeed in its numbers-driven environment.

The Kenan-Flagler culture strongly emphasizes both leadership and teamwork, but the admissions committee will more actively evaluate your leadership potential. To bolster that potential, first-year students take a two-part course called Leading and Managing. Students begin the course by reviewing leadership evaluations filled out by their former colleagues. These evaluations pinpoint leadership growth opportunities that students focus on throughout the course. Each student ultimately produces a leadership plan which details the areas in which she would like to improve. There should be at least three aspects of your leadership capabilities that you emphasize in your application: Use of analytical skills to assess situations, ability to leverage resources (both people and tools) in developing solutions, and success in implementing solutions. Discussion of these leadership traits will help you establish fit with Kenan-Flagler’s mission.

If you are considering an entrepreneurial career path, discussing it in your application is a great way to get your application a second look. We’re not talking about merely mentioning that entrepreneurship is an interest, but rather actually discussing the innovation you would like to bring to the market. The latter will get you further because Kenan-Flagler is interested in students who are serious about entrepreneurship. It has spent the last several years augmenting its entrepreneurial program and is hoping to become a household name in the area. Under the direction of the school’s Center for Entrepreneurial and Technology Venturing, students can now select from a suite of

electives that provide insight into each stage of business model development. The school holds an annual venture capital competition, during which aspiring entrepreneurs put their models to the test and receive feedback from established venture capital firms. It can even be competitive to get into some of the later-stage entrepreneurial classes, which require an application and a business plan.

Despite the accolades Kenan-Flagler has received for making improvements to its program, it still has a relatively low yield percentage. The admissions committee will take a close look at your application to see whether you are serious about attending the school. Naturally, establishing fit with the school's mission and values is a good way to express your interest. An additional, more conventional way to do so is by visiting the campus. The admissions committee looks positively on applicants who visit the campus as a way to get to know the school and the learning model more intimately. Taking this step will express the level of commitment for which the school is looking.

Insider information

In the past, Kenan-Flagler was criticized for its lack of focus on international business. It has since increased its global emphasis by adding an international business concentration, increasing study abroad opportunities, and adding language courses. The school now actively looks for applicants who are interested in pursuing global careers, so if you have any experience or interests along those lines, make sure to bring it out in your application.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ Cornell University (Johnson).
- ☐ Emory University (Goizueta).
- ☐ Vanderbilt University (Owen).

University of Pennsylvania (The Wharton School)

www.wharton.upenn.edu

Philadelphia, PA

Application at a glance

Application due dates (first, second, third round): Oct. 24, Jan. 9, Mar. 13.

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Four (two of 1,000 words each, two of 500 words each).
- ☐ Interview: By invitation only.
- ☐ Recommendations: Two, at least one should come from a direct supervisor.
- ☐ Resume.
- ☐ Application fee: \$175 (online), \$200 (paper).

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): Patrick T. Harker (2000)

Admissions director: Rosemaria Martinelli

Program size: 1,600 full-time

Acceptance rate: 13 percent

Yield: 74 percent

Mean GPA: 3.5

Mean GMAT: 711

Middle 80 percent GMAT: 660–760

Average years of work experience: 6.4

International: 36 percent

Women: 34 percent

Minority: 27 percent

Your Wharton application strategy

Wharton sums up its b-school positioning in two words: Wharton Innovates. Indeed, Wharton's stellar reputation and consistent appearance at the top of the rankings can be attributed to the school's ability to transform itself since its establishment in 1881 as the nation's first collegiate business school. Part of your challenge as an applicant is to get the admissions committee to think of your position as *Your Name Here* Innovates.

In support of its Wharton Innovates positioning, Wharton is actively expanding its promotion of entrepreneurial activity. The Small Business Development Center features an opportunity through which students act as consultants to local aspiring entrepreneurs. As consultants, students assist with business model development, raising capital, and conducting feasibility studies. Wharton also hosts an annual business plan competition during which student teams compete for more than \$70,000. After completing the business plan, students can utilize the Venture Initiation Program (VIP) to transform their idea into a business. VIP provides Wharton students with the support they need to complete the final part of the entrepreneurial process. If you have any entrepreneurial aspiration, discuss it in detail in your application and it will definitely catch the admission committee's eyes.

There is perhaps no other business school in the United States that is as international minded as Wharton. Incoming classes represent over 65 countries, most students speak a second language, and the learning model encourages students to look at business issues from a global context. The school offers premier global joint programs through Penn's Lauder Institute and Johns Hopkins University's Nitze School of Advanced International Studies. For students who are interested in a more traditional study abroad experience, Wharton offers exchange programs in 11 countries and the Global Immersion Program (GIP). GIP includes six weeks of studying a global region, followed by a four week study abroad to that region. If you have any international experience, make sure to work it into your application, because it will probably be

valued by Wharton more so than by other schools. If you haven't worked or studied abroad, demonstrate a global perspective in your professional interests or display an interest in developing one while at Wharton. Overall, Wharton is very serious about its international mission and seeks applicants who aid and or benefit from that mission.

Wharton is often credited for having a top-notch finance curriculum, and its students are widely sought after for their finance capabilities. This means that the admissions committee will be paying close attention to your analytical abilities, as conveyed through your GMAT score, GPA, and professional activities. This doesn't mean that you have to come across as a quantitative guru, but it does mean that you have to show you can "hack it" in the classroom. Wharton has historically been friendly to applicants from non-traditional backgrounds, but that doesn't preclude analytical ability.

While Wharton certainly is a "powerhouse" finance school, its strengths stretch far beyond finance. Wharton offers 19 majors and features approximately 200 electives, more than any other business school in the world. Students can specialize in everything from Real Estate to Health Care Management to Technological Innovation to Strategic Management. Students are also allowed to create their own majors that focus on cross-functional learning paths. The seemingly unending options are like a smorgasbord of delicious treats. It would serve your application well to discuss a Wharton learning path and provide details on how it will aid you in achieving your professional goals.

Over the last several years, Wharton has also placed more emphasis on its students' teamwork capabilities. During their first year, students work on assignments in "learning teams," which are central to the learning model. Members of the Wharton community are quick to emphasize the benefits of learning from students with different professional backgrounds. As such, the school will be extremely interested in your ability to interact in a team-oriented environment. You should expect questions on this to come up during the interview. Additionally, Wharton is genuinely interested in knowing what type of person you are outside of the professional environment. A short discussion of your hobbies or community service activities will show that you are more than a resume.

Insider information

The Wharton admissions committee will look at your application closely to see how you express the maturity dimension. The school really values professional experience, as reflected in its relatively high average years of work experience. Rejected applicants are often told that they could use another year or two of pertinent work experience. That shouldn't dissuade you from applying if your years of experience fall below the Wharton average, but you should be able to answer the "why now?" and "how will you add value to the classroom?" questions. You should especially expect this to come up during the interview if you have less than three years professional experience.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ Columbia Business School.
- ☐ MIT (Sloan).

- ☐ NYU (Stern).
- ☐ University of London (LBS).

University of Rochester (William E. Simon School of Business)

www.simon.rochester.edu

Rochester, NY

Application at a glance

Application due dates (first, second, third, and fourth round): Dec. 15, Feb. 1, Mar. 15, June 1.

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Four of 350 words each.
- ☐ Interview: Highly recommended.
- ☐ Recommendations: Two, with one preferably coming from a direct supervisor.
- ☐ Resume.
- ☐ Application fee: \$125.

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): Charles I. Plosser (1993)

Admissions director: Pamela A. Black-Colton

Program size: 429 full-time

Acceptance rate: 32 percent

Yield: 43 percent

Mean undergraduate GPA: 3.2

Mean GMAT: 649

Middle 80 percent GMAT: 590–720

Average years of work experience: 5.3

International: 50 percent

Women: 24 percent

Minority: 25 percent

Your Simon application strategy

Simon offers a heavy dose of quantitative learning within a small school environment. The school's curriculum is unique in that it approaches most of the major academic disciplines from an economics perspective. Simon students study Finance, Marketing, and Organizational Behavior all through the lens of economic theory, and are encouraged to tie these subjects together by using basic economic principles. The school believes strongly in this approach to business training. You won't be expected to

Speak intelligently about price elasticity or supply and demand curves in your admissions interview, but be ready to demonstrate an understanding of this learning approach and to explain why it appeals to you.

Simon students are also expected to take a rigorous, analytical approach in nearly every subject, and the school is careful to screen for analytical abilities in the admissions process. In fact, Simon recently raised its minimum requirements for statistics experience among its admitted students. The school will give you every opportunity to get up to speed before you enroll if you haven't already studied statistics or calculus, but be aware that the school will look closely at your quantitative GMAT score and your college transcript for evidence of analytical abilities.

In addition to its emphasis on quantitative skills, Simon's core curriculum gives students an opportunity to develop their leadership and communication skills in a small, team-based environment. Students take their first-year core classes in small cohorts of 40 people each, and also are assigned to five-person study teams in which they participate throughout their entire first year. Simon emphasizes the learning teams in order to expose all students to the diversity of their peers and to try to overcome the competitive pressures that such a rigorous environment can produce. In a small environment like Simon's, the ability to get along with your peers is a must, so think about ways to demonstrate an outgoing personality and knack for teamwork.

Starting in the school's pre-term course and continuing throughout the first year, students also take a series of courses in communication skills, featuring small workshops and one-on-one coaching conducted by second-year students and school staff. This personal coaching is common throughout the school, and is another benefit of its small size. Students are also encouraged to get involved at the school. Part of students' learning outside the classroom—the VISION program, which teaches such skills as negotiation and change management—is run by second-year students. The school looks carefully for evidence that you are truly interested in Simon, and demonstrating your enthusiasm for these unique programs can help convince the admissions committee of your interest.

Simon is best known in finance circles, which is no surprise given its emphases on economic theory and quantitative skills. Students can exercise their finance muscles by managing the student-run Simon Meliora Fund (which is made up of a portion of the university's endowment) or by participating in the school's annual Investment Challenge. While nearly half of each class goes into finance, the school also attracts many consulting and even marketing firms that are interested in students' analytical abilities. Simon recently introduced two new concentrations in Health Sciences Management and E-Commerce to go along with its 12 existing concentrations. Give either of these a look if they complement your background and your career goals.

Insider information

Simon looks for several traits in its applicants, all stemming from the school's definition of what a successful leader can do. It looks for an ability to decipher a murky situation and choose a course of action—an extension of the school's emphasis on analytical abilities. Simon also looks for people who understand how to persuade and motivate people. This is where the school's Organizational Behavior and Communications

classes come into play. Finally, the school looks for an ability to recognize talents in other individuals and to encourage their skill development, which is reflected in Simon's emphasis on teamwork. Think about ways in which you can demonstrate these abilities through past experiences, and discuss them in the essays portion of the application.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ Carnegie Mellon.
- ☐ University of Chicago.

University of Southern California (Marshall School of Business)

www.marshall.usc.edu

Los Angeles, CA

Application at a glance

Application due dates (first, second, third, and fourth round): Dec. 1, Jan. 15, Feb. 15, Apr. 1.

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Six (four short essays, two of two pages each).
- ☐ Interview: By invitation only.
- ☐ Recommendations: Two, at least one should come from a direct supervisor. Suggest that a written recommendation letter accompany the required evaluation form.
- ☐ Resume.
- ☐ Application fee: \$125.

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): Randolph W. Westerfield (1993)

Admissions director: Keith Vaughn

Program size: 565 full-time

Acceptance rate: 21 percent

Yield: 51 percent

Mean GPA: 3.4

Mean GMAT: 684

Middle 80 percent GMAT: 640–720

Average years of work experience: 4.5

International: 22 percent

Women: 34 percent

Minority: 41 percent

Your Marshall application strategy

Positioned as more than an MBA program, the Marshall School of Business portrays itself as a life-transforming experience. This experience is referred to as the Marshall Advantage and is highlighted by an application-focused curriculum and special programs in entrepreneurship and international business. The experience is augmented by the Trojan Family culture, which emphasizes teamwork, integrity, and professionalism. Your Marshall application strategy should demonstrate your ability to leverage the Marshall Advantage in addition to displaying fit with the Trojan Family culture.

From the moment students begin the Marshall program, they notice a strong emphasis on career development and putting theory into practice. A majority of the Marshall faculty has significant professional experience. The professors work in teams to discuss ways to highlight the application of theory in the classroom. Not surprisingly, the Marshall Admissions Committee will closely evaluate your maturity dimension. The committee is in search of applicants who can contribute to the classroom based on their success in professional and personal endeavors. Examples that you can provide to impress the committee along these lines include promotions, discussions of passion for your work or community, tangible improvements made to your company, and leadership demonstrated in group settings.

Marshall owns bragging rights to being the first business school with a dedicated entrepreneurship program. That program, supported by the Lloyd Greif Center for Entrepreneurial Studies is now recognized as one of the top in the nation. Students have the opportunity to compete in business plan competitions in addition to developing their own business models. Discussing your entrepreneurial ambitions is a good way to display fit with Marshall's commitment to this subject. Along with Entrepreneurship, Marshall offers almost 20 concentrations in areas such as Business of Entertainment, Corporate Finance, General Marketing, Investments and Financial Markets, Management Consulting, Real Estate Finance, and Technology Development and E-business.

Marshall's commitment to international business is highlighted by the fact that all students are required to travel abroad as part of the Pacific Rim Education Program (PRIME). As part of the first-year curriculum PRIME is a five-week program, during which students become more familiar with the global aspects of business through lectures, casework, and a team project. Students can select from a number of countries including Chile, China, Japan, Singapore, Thailand, Cuba, or Mexico. PRIME has quickly become a favorite among students and a majority of them actually accept internships in the countries that they select for the program. International opportunities outside of PRIME include study abroad programs that come in lengths of three weeks, four weeks, or an entire semester. Marshall will continue to look for ways to make a name for itself in the international arena, and it is therefore important that you display knowledge of or a desire to gain knowledge of global business issues.

Teamwork rests at the core of the Marshall learning model. Students begin the program by participating in a retreat that focuses on developing interpersonal and teamwork skills. When classes begin, students are placed in study groups of four to six classmates

who work together during the first term and are then reshuffled in each term thereafter. Additionally, teams of six students participate in a series of case competitions, which call for students to come up with recommendations to real-world business issues and then present to faculty, classmates, and company representatives.

Insider information

Despite the myriad offerings with which Marshall provides its students, it often plays second fiddle to UCLA (Anderson), Berkeley (Haas), and Stanford. Marshall is looking to become more competitive with these area schools by highlighting the quantitative rigor of the program. As such, the admissions committee will take a close look at your quantitative GMAT score in addition to looking at your transcript(s) for evidence of proficiency in numbers-intensive courses. If you don't have a quantitative-heavy background, consider taking an accounting, statistics, or calculus course. The admissions committee will also take a close look and evaluate the probability that you will accept an offer. You can increase your chances by displaying intimate knowledge of the Marshall learning model and passion for the school's mission and values.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ Emory University (Goizueta).
- ☐ University of California at Berkeley (Haas).
- ☐ UCLA (Anderson).
- ☐ University of Michigan Business School.

University of Texas at Austin (McCombs School of Business)

www.bus.utexas.edu

Austin, TX

Application at a glance

Application due dates (Early, International, Domestic): Nov. 1, Feb. 1, Mar. 15 (rolling admissions).

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Three of two pages each.
- ☐ Interview: Recommended.
- ☐ Recommendations: Two, with at least one preferably coming from a direct supervisor or coworker.
- ☐ Resume.
- ☐ Application fee: \$125.

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): George Gau (2002)

Admissions director: Matt Turner

Program size: 805 full-time
Acceptance rate: 29 percent
Yield: 52 percent
Mean undergraduate GPA: 3.4
Mean GMAT: 678
Middle 80 percent GMAT: 640–710
Average years of work experience: 5.0
International: 27 percent
Women: 25 percent
Minority: 10 percent

Your McCombs application strategy

The newly named McCombs School of Business—named after Red McCombs, who gave the school \$50 million in 2000—offers a general management program known for innovation in business education. It offers no formal majors, but it does offer concentrations in the traditional business disciplines, such as Marketing and Finance. Students may also choose a “specialization”; a focused set of cross-functional courses designed to address a current business topic such as Entrepreneurship, Market-based Consulting, and Global Business Management. About half of all McCombs students choose one of these concentrations.

Teamwork is a major emphasis at McCombs, with students doing most of their work in project teams. Students also spend their entire first year taking their core classes together in cohorts. Naturally, the school looks for people who will thrive in this environment, so be sure to demonstrate your experience in working with others to make things happen.

One example of McCombs’ innovation is its new Plus Program, a two-week mini-term that takes place in the middle of each regular semester. The program is a series of seminars that give students intense, practical training in topics such as sales, communications, and ethics. Students take these courses in one of six “academies,” each one having a focus on a particular industry or line of business. Examples of academies are Community Development and Social Enterprise, The Business of Entertainment, and Product Design Innovation. Students apply to these academies in the fall, and are assigned based on their preferences and past experience. Through a series of four two-week Plus Program courses, students work on specific skills and tackle broad business topics within their assigned academies. Much of the work is done in workshops and small teams, and many of these exercises use improvisational exercises and games to help students learn how to think quickly on their feet. These activities exemplify what McCombs is about, so if they appeal to you, make sure to communicate that in your application. Also, as mentioned above, think about ways to demonstrate how you will fit into this environment, particularly by emphasizing your teamwork and maturity dimensions, as described in Chapter 2.

Two programs that demonstrate the school’s emphasis on hands-on experience are its MOOT CORP business plan competition and its MBA Investment Fund. Since 1984,

the school has hosted MOOT CORP (we wish we knew why it's in all caps), the oldest and largest inter-business school business plan competition in the world. The competition now attracts teams from 30 schools, and winning teams get a chance to start their business in the friendly confines of the Austin Technology Incubator. Be sure to get to know this program better if you plan on applying to McCombs as a prospective entrepreneur.

Each year, 20 students are selected to run the MBA Investment Fund, a \$12 million fund that was created in 1994 as the first legally constituted, private investment company to be managed by students. McCombs students have an opportunity to apply growth, value, and fixed-income strategies to several portfolios. The student managers manage a small part of the school's endowment, getting advice from professional money managers along the way. If you have an interest in investment management—or even just like the school's hands-on learning philosophy—be sure to show your enthusiasm for it in your application.

Insider information

Like other highly-ranked schools with relatively low yield percentages, McCombs is careful about selecting people whom it believes have a sincere interest in its program. While most schools hope to see interest and enthusiasm demonstrated throughout your application, McCombs specifically looks for it in its essays questions. Invest considerable time in researching the school and finding out what kind of opportunities interest you (or could be added to the program). Even more importantly, focus less on trying to pick out an obscure activity to impress the admissions committee, and focus more on writing about something that truly interests you and highlighting how you will pursue that interest at McCombs. If your interest isn't currently met by one of the school's activities, then you have a great chance to show your initiative by proposing how you would start an activity around that interest. The key is to write about something for which you truly have passion, and to show how you will bring that same passion to McCombs.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ Indiana University (Kelley).
- ☐ Vanderbilt University (Owen).

University of Virginia (Darden Graduate School of Business)

www.darden.virginia.edu

Charlottesville, VA

Application at a glance

Application due dates (first, second, third, fourth, and fifth round): Nov. 1, Dec. 3, Jan. 10, Feb. 11, Mar. 25.

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Four each of unlimited length.
- ☐ Interview: Applicant-initiated until mid-February. After mid-February, by invitation only.
- ☐ Recommendations: Two, work-related recommendations are suggested.
- ☐ Application fee: \$140.

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): Robert S. Harris (2001)

Admissions director: Dawna Clark

Program size: 600 full-time

Acceptance rate: 18 percent

Yield: 53 percent

Mean GPA: 3.4

Mean GMAT: 683

Middle 80 percent GMAT: 620–740

Average years of work experience: 5.4

International: 27 percent

Women: 30 percent

Minority: 16 percent

Your Darden application strategy

Upon visiting Darden, you will be immediately struck by three traits: the stunning campus, the dynamic classroom interactions, and the academic discipline. Each of these traits is rooted in closely-guarded tradition. While many business schools have changed their models over time to keep up with the latest fads, Darden has remained true to the ideals that have kept its students highly regarded as general managers. Your application should clearly display your fit with the Darden philosophy.

The central tenets of the Darden philosophy are based upon the close-knit feel of the school and the respect among students and faculty. Every weekday morning “First Coffee” is held, during which the Darden community sits down and discusses topics that are pertinent to the school. Students consistently rave about the bonds that are formed throughout their years at Darden, and the alumni are among the most committed to their alma mater. Indeed Darden has the highest endowment per alum of any business school. Although the class size is growing, the small school feeling remains. If you intend to get accepted, you should indicate your desire to become a member of this community and provide examples of how you have and would be a contributing alum. A visit to the Darden campus and classroom is a great way to show commitment to the school; just make sure to mention the visit in your application.

The case study method still remains the major pedagogical tool through which the Darden learning model is taught. Professors select students through cold calls to

initiate case analysis and then invite the entire class to participate in the dialogue. Students are placed in the role of the decision maker and must have the ability to articulate and defend their positions in an insightful manner. Your ability to contribute to case conversations will most likely be tested during your Darden interview. The interviewer will be evaluating your ability to provide cogent responses, your confidence level, and your professionalism. Your challenge is to position yourself as a candidate who can play both the student and the teacher roles within the case study framework. It should be noted, however, that while Darden is a case study school at heart, it has added other educational devices to its toolbox such as: video cases, articles, simulations, and experiential activities.

While the cases place you in the role of an individual decision-maker, case preparation is conducted in student learning teams. As a student, you would be placed in a learning team immediately after starting the Darden program. Teams are expected to meet every night, so discussing your ability to interact well with others should be an important piece of your application.

Darden expects its graduates to be leaders in their fields, but it also understands that leadership is learned through a path of progression. Make sure your essays show a progression in leadership and your recommendations highlight your potential to continue growing as a leader.

Darden is also well known for its strong emphasis on ethics. All students are required to take a course on the subject and ethical challenges often arise in cases throughout the rest of the curriculum. The Olsson Center for Applied Ethics supports Darden's continued examination of the ethical aspects of business. Don't be surprised if a question on ethics comes up during your interview. Make sure to review the approach to these types of questions that we outlined in Chapter 4.

Darden is one of the few schools that doesn't impose word limits on its essays. This is nice because of the added flexibility. However, that added flexibility can also lead some applicants to go overboard, writing essays that quickly lose their focus and clarity. It is therefore extra important for you to ensure that your essays answer the stated questions and do so in a powerful and thoughtful manner. Make sure that your essays are segmented using headers and that any background information provided is only given to support your position. Even though the essays have no limit, admissions members certainly have limited patience.

Insider information

While some modifications have been made to the Darden learning model to curb excessive work, the academic experience remains intense. Although students don't take exams on Saturdays, as in the past, the Darden experience is anything but a two year vacation. Perhaps for no other school is the analogy to drinking from a firehose more appropriate. There are no days off at Darden, as students spend more time in the classroom than at any other top business school and conquer 13 cases a week on average. Students are expected to enter the program with a background in statistics, economics, and accounting. The benefit from such a rigorous learning model is that graduates truly feel that they've received value in return for their efforts. The intensity pays off in

preparation. Focus on this benefit and your ability to succeed within the parameters of the learning model, and you will be on your way to establishing a good fit with the Darden traditions.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ Cornell University (Johnson).
- ☐ Dartmouth College (Tuck).
- ☐ Harvard Business School.
- ☐ University of Western Ontario (Ivey).

University of Western Ontario (Richard Ivey School of Business)

www.ivey.uwo.ca

London, Ontario, Canada

Application at a glance

Application due dates (first, second, and third round): Dec. 1, Feb. 1, Apr. 1.

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Three of 500 words each.
- ☐ Interview: By invitation only.
- ☐ Recommendations: At least one letter of recommendation is encouraged.
- ☐ Application fee: \$125 online, \$150 paper application (Canadian currency).

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): Lawrence G. Tapp (1995)

Admissions director: Joanne Shoveller

Program size: 593 full-time

Acceptance rate: 34 percent

Yield: 57 percent

Mean undergraduate GPA: N/A

Mean GMAT: 661

Middle 80 percent GMAT: 600–720

Average years of work experience: 5.5

International: 43 percent (foreign nationals)

Women: 25 percent

Minority: N/A

Your Ivey application strategy

The Richard Ivey School of Business prides itself on turning out business leaders with well-rounded general management skills. Ivey students don't major in a particular

subject, but rather receive a general management degree. All students work through the same core curriculum the first year, and spend their second year taking electives that allow them to focus on a particular discipline, or stay generalists if they so choose. One noteworthy part of the second year is the Ivey Client Field Project (ICFP), the only required course for second-year students. In ICFP, teams of students work with a company to identify business issues and to recommend a course of action. Students spend most of their second year on the project, working with employees from the company and with a faculty advisor along the way. At the end of the project, they present their recommendations to the company's management. ICFP is a great example of the general management approach that Ivey aims to instill in its students. Demonstrating an understanding of the program and the real-world value that it can provide will help show your fit with the school.

More than nearly any other school, Ivey is completely devoted to the case study method of learning. The school estimates that students evaluate and discuss about 600 cases in their two years at Ivey. Students typically spend one to three hours preparing for each case individually and in learning teams, and then discuss their opinions and analysis in class, with the professor directing the discussion. It's a rigorous approach to learning, and one that requires a certain kind of student.

Accordingly, Ivey looks for applicants with strong academic backgrounds, as well as those with a willingness to throw themselves into tough challenges. The school likes applicants who bring a unique point of view to class, in order to encourage consideration of a wide range of perspectives in each discussion. Ivey also looks for applicants with polish who are not afraid to voice their opinions. Any way in which you can demonstrate a time when you had to persuade others to follow you, or when you had to make an unpopular decision, will help greatly. Finally, the school looks for people who will make good citizens in the classroom. The case method works best when everyone involved is willing to consider others' opinions.

Think carefully about how you can demonstrate these kinds of traits in your application, starting with the work you did in Chapter 2. The more easily that the admissions committee can envision you as a thoughtful and active participant in an Ivey case discussion, the better off you will be. Also, remember that Ivey's program is a general management one where a broad perspective is valued over specific quantitative skills. Make sure that a general management education is what you want, and spell out why this is valuable to you in your application.

Finally, Ivey is interested in students with an international perspective. Each year, 50 or so Ivey students take part in programs like the Leader Project, in which students spend three weeks teaching business concepts to students in places such as Russia, Belarus, and Cuba. Students interested in Asia can also spend a month teaching at the School of Economics and Management at Tsinghua University in Beijing. While an international resume isn't required, Ivey will look for an interest in global business issues, and a willingness to stretch outside of your comfort zone. Think about ways in which you can demonstrate these in your essays.

Insider information

As mentioned earlier, Ivey's philosophy and learning style are built around the unique contributions that each student brings to the classroom. While the school places no official minimum on the amount of work experience an applicant needs, Ivey is clear about preferring applicants with at least two years of experience. The admissions committee will not only look at how much experience you have, but also will look for ways in which your experiences make you unique. If you come from an uncommon background, such as entrepreneurship or nonprofit work, then be sure to emphasize what you have learned and how it makes you different than other applicants. At the same time, make clear that you have the business acumen that it takes to succeed in the case study environment. If you come from consulting or banking, then your challenge will be to set yourself apart from similar applicants. Spend a lot of time putting your uniqueness into words, ideally with distinctive work challenges and notable activities outside of the office.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ Harvard Business School.
- ☐ University of Virginia (Darden).

Vanderbilt University (Owen Graduate School of Management)

www.mba.vanderbilt.edu

Nashville, TN

Application at a glance

Application due dates (first, second, third, and fourth round): Nov. 30, Jan. 31, Mar. 15, Apr. 15.

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Three of three pages each.
- ☐ Interview: Recommended.
- ☐ Recommendations: Two, both preferably coming from a direct supervisor or coworker.
- ☐ Resume.
- ☐ Application fee: \$100.

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): William Christie (2000)

Admissions director: Todd Reale

Program size: 577 full-time

Acceptance rate: 47 percent

Yield: 46 percent

Mean undergraduate GPA: 3.3

Mean GMAT: 648

Middle 80 percent GMAT: 588–710

Average years of work experience: 4.7

International: 22 percent

Women: 24 percent

Minority: 12 percent

Your Owen application strategy

Few schools have undergone as much change in the last few years as Owen. After Martin Geisel—who had led the school for 12 years—died in 1999, the school took nearly a year and a half to find a full-time replacement. During that time, it lost nine professors (about 20 percent of its faculty), and students complained that the lack of leadership was hurting the school. Some wondered if the school had peaked.

Enter William Christie, an Owen finance professor who was eventually selected to lead the school in July 2000. Christie is young as far as deans go, but students say that what he might lack in experience is more than made up for by the energy that he displays in the classroom. He has started some innovative new programs to bring the administration closer to the student body, including “The Dean Is In,” a regularly scheduled time in which he sets up a table and dispenses advice to any student who has a question. The result is that students now have great things to say about the administration, and they once again feel good about the school’s leadership and direction.

Owen is small, and it boasts a faculty-to-student ratio of about 10:1. The school’s academic program emphasizes practical application of management knowledge, and that comes through in its Practical Training Internship. This program gives Owen students a look at the issues that most frequently come up in the day-to-day running of a business. Students then apply these lessons during their summer internships, and write in-depth reports of their experiences at the end of the summer.

In addition to completing the core curriculum, Owen students can concentrate in areas such as Finance, Marketing, Operations, or Human and Organizational Performance. The school also offers several “emphases,” including Brand Management, Entrepreneurship, and Healthcare. The school is known for maintaining a flexible curriculum, so don’t be surprised to see the school add new concentrations or emphases to keep up with the changing times.

As in the case with many small schools, Owen has a collegial, close-knit community where student involvement is high. Students are encouraged to voice their opinions on school-wide matters, and the administration is known to listen to them. Keep this in mind as you think about the aspects of your application that demonstrate your community involvement.

Owen looks for students who really want to attend the school. Owen is likely to sniff out someone who is just looking for a “safety school,” so make sure that you demonstrate why you want to spend two years there.

Insider information

Owen made waves with its Electronic Commerce concentration in the late 1990s, as the school made a bold move to establish itself as a leader in the field of e-commerce management training. It was a logical move for a program that was trying to move from having a regional name to a global brand. The tech industry slowdown has meant that Owen's advantage in this arena has been somewhat diminished, but its e-commerce program is still well regarded among recruiters, despite the school's location away from the traditional high tech hotspots. Keep it in mind if you want to build your e-commerce resume and are willing to venture away from the coasts for a couple of years.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ University of Maryland (Smith).
- ☐ UNC (Kenan-Flagler).
- ☐ University of Texas (McCombs).

Yale School of Management

www.mba.yale.edu

New Haven, CT

Application at a glance

Application due dates (first, second, third, and late round): Nov. 15, Jan. 6, Mar. 14, May 15.

Requirements

- ☐ Essays: Five (one of two pages, four of one page).
- ☐ Interview: Applicant initiated until December, by invitation only thereafter.
- ☐ Recommendations: Three, preferably two from managers and one from an academic instructor.
- ☐ Resume.
- ☐ Application fee: \$180.

School at a glance

Dean (start of tenure): Jeffrey E. Garten (1995)

Admissions director: James R. Stevens

Program size: 480 full-time

Acceptance rate: 15 percent

Yield: 63 percent

Mean undergraduate GPA: 3.5

Mean GMAT: 698

Middle 80 percent GMAT: 640–750

Average years of work experience: 5.0

International: 43 percent

Women: 27 percent

Minority: 22 percent

Your Yale application strategy

The Yale School of Management aims to produce leaders who will make a difference both within their organizations and in their communities. The school's stated mission is to educate leaders "for business and society." While over two-thirds of each class go into finance or consulting (like most other business schools), there is a much greater emphasis on nonprofit and public sector lessons and opportunities at Yale than at most other schools. No matter what their career goals are, the candidates who most appeal to the admissions committee are the ones who demonstrate a broad perspective and an understanding of the importance of contributing to society at large.

Yale students spend their first year learning the school's core curriculum. The core includes the usual business school courses (including economics, finance, marketing, and operations), but also covers topics such as Leadership and The Politics of Strategic Management. These courses apply the theory of politics and influence to business management situations, something that is common throughout Yale's curriculum. Think about this approach to learning, how it might appeal to you, and what you may be able to contribute to the classroom. Students take electives in pursuit of one of seven concentrations, including Marketing, Strategy, Finance, Leadership, Public Management, Operations Management, and Nonprofit Management.

Fittingly, Yale's nonprofit program is one of the best-known in the United States. The school offers extensive elective options in nonprofit and public sector management, and also provides students with a variety of opportunities for getting involved in their communities outside of class. Yale's Internship Fund, established in 1979, provides financial assistance to students who take on non- or low-paying jobs in the nonprofit or public sector. Funds are raised from student contributions, and up to one-fifth of the class receives some amount of funding in any given year. Even if you don't plan on pursuing a nonprofit job after school, demonstrating enthusiasm for getting involved in this type of program can help further show your fit with the school.

Entrepreneurship is also a focus at Yale, and students have several opportunities to get involved in building a business. Yale hosts an annual business plan competition, with entries divided into two categories: for profit and social entrepreneurship. The school also hosts a separate National Business Plan Competition for Nonprofit Organizations, blending the school's strengths in community involvement and entrepreneurship. Outside of the nonprofit sector, Yale students also run their own venture capital fund, known as Sachem Ventures. This \$1.5 million fund gives students a chance to screen, invest in, and work with startups in the New Haven area.

When thinking about demonstrating fit with Yale, focus especially on the leadership and innovation dimensions of your application. As mentioned previously, the school looks for applicants who contribute to their community, and this is perhaps the most

important component of the school's definition of leadership. Additionally, the school stresses the importance of understanding the interaction between the private sector and public sector, so you want to demonstrate a "big picture" view and a willingness to learn about how one affects the other, no matter what your career interest is. As far as innovation goes, Yale looks for applicants who are comfortable with having their thinking challenged and are willing to take intellectual risks. The more you can demonstrate a willingness to "think outside of the box" both on the job and in your extracurricular activities, the better off you will be. Additionally, the school looks for applicants with integrity, so think about how you can demonstrate this as part of your maturity dimension.

Insider information

Yale is looking for business-minded people who are just as comfortable talking about world politics as they are pricing a financial instrument. You can show fit with the program by demonstrating your knowledge of current events and a natural desire to get involved in your community. Note that Yale's essays serve as a great opportunity for you to show that you know what is going on in the world around you, and that you have an opinion that's worth hearing. Don't just try to tell the admissions committee what you think they want to hear. Rather, take a position in which you truly believe and succinctly support it with a real-world example or two.

Schools that call for a similar approach

- ☐ Harvard Business School.
- ☐ University of California at Berkeley (Haas).

11 MBA Trends You Should Be Aware Of

MBA programs are constantly changing. They are as prone to trends as the stock market is to fluctuation. Just a few years ago, cases and courses on e-business dominated the business school scene. While a few schools have kept a strong focus on e-business, most have revamped their curricula to reflect the "new new economy." Being aware of similar trends can be extremely helpful as you develop your application strategy. Here are 11 such trends:

1. **Ethics:** You can thank companies such as Global Crossing, Tyco, and Enron for many of the essay questions on ethics that have been recently added to schools' applications. As discussions of corporate ethics and social responsibility continue to remain prominent in the marketplace, you can expect business schools to place a strong emphasis on them. Many schools are adding or considering adding required courses on ethics and are becoming more aggressive in verifying the accuracy of submitted applications. You should be prepared to answer questions about how you've dealt with ethical dilemmas, both in essay and interview form.
2. **Quantitative rigor:** Success in business school has always required analytical skills, but the level of quantitative rigor that is being introduced into programs is increasing. This is a direct result of recruiters' demands for

graduates who are numbers-oriented. More schools are beginning to require students to have completed a calculus course in addition to other business courses prior to starting the curriculum. Thankfully, many schools offer quantitative “boot camps” prior to the first year to get students with non-quantitative backgrounds up to speed.

3. **Emphasis on leadership:** While the teamwork theme has not lost any steam, it seems as though every business school is suddenly referring to its students as leaders. The discussion of leadership will continue to gain momentum as schools begin to view their students as change agents not only within the business realm but also within society as a whole.
4. **Application of theory:** “Our students actually take the knowledge they gain in the classroom and apply it in the real world.” As you peruse through MBA brochures, you will undoubtedly come across messages similar to this. Business schools were once criticized heavily for giving students tools but not teaching them how those tools are actually used in the business environment. Based on that criticism, many schools adopted experiential learning methods that allowed students to use principles learned during lectures and case discussions in simulations, consulting projects, and business plans. This method of teaching has become exceptionally popular and is now used at most schools to varying degrees.
5. **Entrepreneurship:** Courses and activities focused on entrepreneurship have become exceedingly popular at business schools. Programs are actively pumping millions of dollars into the development of centers that research and produce research and resources focused on the subject. If you have an exciting entrepreneurial idea, you will find that by discussing it in your application, you will catch the eye of several admissions committees.
6. **Diversity of experience:** Schools love to brag about the variety of backgrounds that their student bodies represent. In fact, at most schools, students that studied business in undergrad are in the minority. Students say that having classmates who represent a diversity of experience improves the learning process. Schools will continue to actively assemble diverse classes, so it’s up to you stand out from the pack by presenting a number of professional and personal experiences.
7. **Focus on yield:** Yield, the percentage of applicants who accept an offer from a school, is becoming more of a focus area among b-schools. Admissions committees are taking a closer look at applicants to see what their level of fit is. It is important that you convince schools that you are serious about attending, even prior to receiving an offer.
8. **Widening gap between tiers:** As the popularity of the MBA degree increased, more schools added it to their graduate offerings. However, with the economic downturn, this has allowed recruiters to become more selective in MBA hiring. The result has been that holding a degree from a “top” program has become even more important in terms of salary, position, and more importantly, simply finding a job.

9. **Global opportunities:** The broader trend of globalization has certainly affected business schools. Alongside their investment in entrepreneurship, business schools are developing new exchange, study abroad, and language study opportunities for their students. Many b-schools view increasing their global presence as a good way to build their brand.
10. **Importance of interviewing:** The interview component of the application used to be viewed as relatively unimportant. Now, more schools are placing a greater emphasis on it, and requiring all admitted applicants to go through the interview process. With an increased number of interviews, many schools have moved to a policy of allowing applicants to only interview upon invitation by the school. Look for that trend to continue.
11. **Active communities:** Schools have begun to place a greater emphasis on building vibrant communities. This means searching for applicants who will be active members of the school during their time as students and, just as importantly, after they graduate. For the most part, you can judge how serious a school is about this trend by the amount of student-run activities that are featured on campus. One way you can make a play on this trend is by discussing activities in which you would be interested in participating and showing an overall passion for the school and its community.

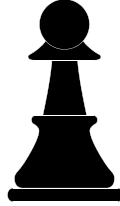
FAQs

What is the definition of a safety or stretch school?

A safety school is a business school to which you have greater than a 90 percent chance of being accepted. Generally, safety schools are considered to be those that have 80th percentile of the school's GMAT scores and mean undergraduate GPAs that are lower than your scores. Additionally, you should ensure that you are no more than one year below the school's average number of years of work experience and that you can project a good fit before you assign the safety school moniker. A stretch school is considered to be any school where either your GMAT score or undergraduate GPA is below the 80th percentile of the schools' scores. Of course, because the application process is about much more than just these numbers, you should only use these statistics as a rough guideline. You can also help yourself by meeting students and alumni from the schools in question and seeing how their experiences compare to your own. You will likely be able to get a good feel for whether or not a school is a stretch or a safety this way.

6

ASSEMBLING YOUR GAME PLAN



The game plan is the culmination of your research and preparation efforts prior to actually “digging” into the application. The plan includes:

- ☐ A timeline for the application process.
- ☐ Your career goals.
- ☐ Information on your target schools.
- ☐ Professional background.
- ☐ Resume.
- ☐ Academic background.
- ☐ Personal background.

Together, these game plan components will serve as:

- ☐ The formulation of your strategy to get accepted by your target schools.
- ☐ A baseline in writing and reviewing your essays.
- ☐ A reference document for your recommenders.
- ☐ A point of preparation for your interviews.

Putting together a game plan is certainly a time-consuming process, but it’s an invaluable tool that is definitely worth the time. Applicants consistently comment that they referenced their plans throughout the application process and that it played a key role in gaining acceptances. Recommenders also find plans to be helpful in crafting recommendations that support the messages that you emphasize in other aspects of your application.

As an example, we’ll now step through portions of a game plan that a successful applicant put together in her attempt to gain acceptance to some of the top business schools. As with other sections, we’ve added our comments to highlight the most important aspects of the document. We will present some sections in their entirety and others in summary form, depending on what we’ve already covered elsewhere in this book.

The applicant, Lauren, has an engineering background and worked at Hartman Energy for the last four years, assisting customers with their energy needs. She wants to go to business school in order to break into general management, study sustainable development techniques, and eventually assist corporations in pursuing environmentally sustainable business practices.

You'll note that Lauren is a very strong applicant. The purpose of stepping through her game plan is not to emphasize her strengths, but rather to show how useful creating application strategies can be. Keep that in mind as you begin to formulate your own game plan.

Lauren began her plan by addressing her recommenders, who she viewed as the main audience. In addition to supplying the document to her recommenders, she utilized her plan as a launch pad in executing her application strategies.

Lauren's game plan

Introduction

The purpose of this game plan is to provide you with information about me as a professional, student, and individual. Additionally, it will provide you with information on my application timeline and background on the business schools for which you are writing recommendations.

The plan has been written in summary and with detail so that you can glean the information you feel is helpful in completing the recommendation forms. The process of writing this plan has helped me to gain a better sense of my story and to document it as I enter the application process.

The competition to get into the world's top MBA programs is fierce; the average acceptance rate at the top schools ranges from 10 to 20 percent. Top business schools receive thousands of applications from individuals with solid work experience, great GPAs, and outstanding GMAT scores. However, schools are looking for more from candidates than 4.0 GPAs, 700 on the GMAT, and work experience at reputable companies. Top business schools are looking for demonstrated leadership potential, ingenuity, the ability to work in teams, and a genuine interest in making a difference in the world.

Recommendations play an extremely important role in the application process. As Stanford puts it, "We have found that the most useful recommendations provide detailed descriptions, candid anecdotes, and specific evidence that highlights a candidate's potential for leadership. This kind of information helps us to distinguish the very best candidates from a pool of many well-qualified ones."

Thank you for your time and assistance with this process, and in general, for your support! — — — — —

Many recommenders won't understand how competitive it is to get into top business schools. It's important that they understand the vital role that they play in helping you get accepted.

Why business school and why now?

When I think about my future, I can picture myself moving into a role that is broader and that has a greater impact on society than my current operational position. In the short-term, I definitely see myself returning to the energy industry. I truly enjoy the challenges, the fast pace, the chance to work closely with bright, dynamic individuals, the exposure to a wide variety of customers and business issues, and the constant personal and professional growth that a career of this nature affords. Given this intent, I believe that I am at a natural point in my career to pursue an MBA. While I feel that I am able to add a considerable amount to my joint Hartman/customer teams, I am anxious to contribute a great deal more. An MBA will give me an even stronger general business foundation and understanding of the “big picture,” deeper knowledge of the business functions of particular interest to me, the opportunity to master concepts that are difficult or time consuming to master on the job (finance, accounting, statistics), thorough quantitative and leadership training, and added confidence in my abilities—all of which will make me a stronger professional and person. — — —

Lauren provides good reasoning for why she's at a point in which she wants to make a transition.

In the long-term, I would like to assist companies in coming up with environmentally sustainable business practices that are beneficial to the companies and their constituencies. My background as an environmental engineer gives me some insight into potential steps companies could take, but I need to learn more about the intersection of business and the environment. My current role in operations limits my ability to have a broad impact on the direction of the company or our customers. I believe that the skills and knowledge that I will gain from a MBA program will afford me the career flexibility that I desire. —

Lauren presents interesting long-term goals that will certainly impact society and leverage her background. She has spent time reflecting on the direction in which she would like to go. Lauren also provided her recommenders with a draft of an essay that contained more details on her career goals.

Given my short- and long-term personal and professional goals, I plan to apply to general management programs that will allow me to develop a background in strategy, finance, and international business. I believe these areas of business will provide me with the tools that I need to analyze sustainable development opportunities and to “sell” companies on how these opportunities can fit in to their long-term visions. I strongly believe that the issues addressed by sustainable development are global in nature and I am therefore interested in how I could introduce solutions at an international level.

Which schools?

I am applying to four schools, all of which have strengths in the areas that I want to study, strong reputations and faculties,

and academic environments that appeal to me. In deciding which schools I would apply to, I evaluated the top MBA programs based on: Academic environment/culture, overall fit with my goals and personality, program reputation, international emphasis, teaching quality/style, program features, and location. Although I am equally enthusiastic about each of the four programs, the schools differ slightly in their areas of recognized expertise. I intend to incorporate program-specific messages into each application and hope that you will reflect those program-specific messages in your recommendations. — — — — —

Lauren demonstrates a good understanding of what she's looking for in a school and provides good reasoning for the selection of her target schools.

The four schools I am applying to are:

- ☐ The London Business School.
- ☐ Kellogg School of Management.
- ☐ Stanford Graduate School of Business.
- ☐ The Wharton School. — — — — —

She made the decision not to apply to a safety school, based on her needs.

Academic environment, culture, and fit with my goals and personality

The schools I've targeted have reputations for having "supportive," "team-oriented," and "family-like" cultures. All of the schools emphasize working in teams to enhance learning and developing leadership abilities. I have always enjoyed approaching problems in teams and believe that I am most effective when working within a collaborative culture. The schools I've selected provide the type of environment in which I would flourish.

The collaborative cultures that each of these schools engender supports the introduction of new ideas in the classroom and through extracurricular activities. Although each school has made some strides in terms of supporting the ideas of sustainable development, I would like to further the agenda at the school that I attend. I know that each one of these schools would welcome that and the possibility of establishing a club or volunteer action team would resonate positively with the admissions committee.

In general, I am seeking a relatively relaxed atmosphere (not overly academic or competitive) recognizing that all of the top schools are rigorous and will require my full, best effort.

Overall program reputation and international emphasis

The four schools selected are all widely regarded for their general academic excellence. Additionally, they are known for their particularly strong general management programs. In one case (London Business School) the international emphasis is obvious; the others offer specific programs or exchange opportunities

to promote a global view of the business world for its graduates. Ideally, I would like to obtain an internship in France working on a renewable energy project and perhaps spend a semester abroad at one of the MBA programs in France (such as INSEAD or HEC). Each school on my target list would provide ample opportunity for me to achieve these goals.

Teaching quality and program features

The schools also receive praise for the overall quality of their professors. Faculty members at my target schools (for both core and elective courses) are not only accomplished teachers, but also renowned in the academic world for developing theory, authoring enduring textbooks, and advancing management thinking. The schools also have student-to-faculty ratios that allow for a great deal of student/teacher contact. Because professors at my undergraduate school were research-focused and had to deal with large class sizes, outstanding teachers and significant one-on-one time were the exception rather than the rule. I'm looking forward to a more exciting learning experience during b-school.

Each school on my list utilizes a variety of teaching methods; class formats vary to best suit the subject and material covered. Whereas students at a Harvard or Darden use the case study method almost 100 percent of the time, students at my target schools benefit from a range of methods—theoretical, discussion, case study, simulation, role play, team project, and independent study. Based on my undergraduate work and work experience, I believe the varied approach better suits my learning style.

Location

I am generally looking at schools in major economic centers that offer plenty of “real business” opportunities within the local corporate community. These locations are also easy to travel to and from (for me, my friends, and family). Because my (soon to be) husband and I will possibly be living apart for two years, this is of significant importance to me.

I have attached a brief write-up on each of the schools with details about their programs, culture, teaching methods, and criteria for admission (See appendix).

Timeline

The following timeline lays out my plans in terms of the application process. Please note the submission due dates for your recommendations.— — — — —

The timeline is a great tool for you and your recommenders that helps ensure that all of the required activities get done on time.

Game plan timeline

Date	Action	
December 1–March 1	(GMAT preparation)/initial school selection	Comment: Starting early is key! Note, that if you have to take the TOEFL, you'll probably want to get started even earlier.
March 10	Take GMAT exam	
March 15–May 15	Additional GMAT preparation	
May 20	(Retake examination)	Comment: Make sure to leave adequate time in case you need to retake the GMAT.
June–July	School research/target school selection	
August 1	Request transcripts	
August–September	Review applications and provide recommenders with forms, game plan, and draft essays	
September 1	(Sign-up for Kellogg interview)	Comment: Sign up for your interviews early, because slots go quickly.
September–November	Work on applications/visit schools	
September 20	Kellogg interview	
October 1	Submit Kellogg application online	
October 7	(Recommendations are due from recommenders)	Comment: Set a due date for your recommenders that is earlier than the actual date by which you need them, so that you have a time buffer.
October 14	Submit Wharton application online	
October 21	Submit Stanford application online	
November 1	(Submit London Business School application online)	Comment: Try to submit your applications at least one week before the deadline, to ensure that it receives proper treatment.
December–January	Cross fingers for acceptances	

Summary

My applications will have similar themes interwoven throughout them, but will be tailored for each school's unique set of evaluation criteria. What follows is background information on my work, academic, and personal experience. This background information will be used to support both my general and program-specific messages. Details for each category are included in the appendix.

Work experience

My most meaningful work experience has been my four years with Hartman Energy. In describing my work experience to date, I will try to give details showing:

- ☐ *A wide variety of experience in a relatively short amount of time.*
- ☐ *Performance at a high level (judged by my project managers and peers) in a team environment.*
- ☐ *My determination, intelligence, creativity, and leadership capabilities.*
- ☐ *Recognition (through rapid promotion) and accomplishments.*

These are all great attributes to express.

Community involvement

I truly enjoy giving back to the various communities to which I belong and have done so for as long as I can remember. In my applications, however, I will emphasize my community involvement since college, as b-schools tend to focus their attention on

post-university experience. When discussing my community involvement, I intend to:

- ☐ *Demonstrate my interest in getting involved in my community, when and where possible, despite keeping a busy travel/ work schedule.*
- ☐ *Highlight the leadership roles I have taken on (because engineers typically lack significant management experience).*
- ☐ *Show that I am the type of applicant who would take full advantage of the b-school experience and would seek out ways to get involved in the MBA community.*

Again, great attributes to express. Admissions counselors love applicants who can demonstrate these traits.

Academic history

I have always loved school. Since I was very young, I have been driven (through positive reinforcement and support from my family) to excel academically. I have always worked extremely hard for my grades, and because of this effort, am very proud of what I've accomplished. Schools look at an applicant's academic history as her best predictor of future performance. I will emphasize:

- ☐ *My scholastic strength in a broad array of subjects in order to demonstrate my ability to handle the quantitative rigor of each program, as well as the 'softer' subjects.*
- ☐ *My achievements in the broader context of involvement in undergrad (extracurricular involvement, leadership positions, work experience). By doing so, I hope to demonstrate my energy, time management ability, and enthusiasm for getting the most out of every experience.*

Personal information

I think the biggest challenge in the application process for most applicants is distinguishing themselves—I know this will be the case for me. Where possible, I will look to provide personal information about myself; as Stanford puts it, "the person behind the grades, test scores, job titles, and leadership positions." Through my applications, I hope to:

- ☐ *Describe the unique set of experiences, interests, and perspectives that I would bring to the b-school community.*
- ☐ *Share my influences, motivations, passions, values, interests, and aspirations.*
- ☐ *Paint a picture of a well-rounded, caring, approachable, motivated person who would add to the MBA community.*

Appendix

The appendix to the game plan contains detailed information on the previously covered topics. The appendix serves as a reference for both the applicant and recommenders, so that they can easily provide supporting data in essays, recommendations, data sheets, and interviews.

Work experience

The work experience section allows you to document all of your professional activities, so that you can select the most pertinent experiences for inclusion in your application. You should document your explicit functional or project work in addition to any work-related extracurricular activities in which you're involved. Additionally, try to include positive comments you've received during any of your reviews. These comments can be a great third-party reference that can be included in your essays or recommendations. You should also consider including a section that outlines your strengths and weaknesses. This will give your recommenders a reference point for a question they most certainly will be asked. At the end of the section, you should include a copy of the resume you put together for one of your target schools.

Academic experience

For many applicants, it will have been several years since they thought about their college experiences. This is the section through which you can relive some of the positive ones. Specifically, you'll want to document your accomplishments and activities inside and outside of the classroom. To the extent possible, you want to project yourself as someone who is always willing to get involved and participate. Showing a history of doing so is a great way to display that trait. You'll also want to bring out any special skills that you developed while you were in school. For example, if you studied a foreign language or simply took a broad range of courses that helped improve your perspective on business issues, then be sure to include that here.

Personal experience

The personal experience section is your opportunity to express that you're more than a paper-pusher. You should discuss the hobbies and interests in which you're involved outside of the work environment. This could include community service activities, sports, theatre, or anything else with which you occupy your time. Knowing the personal side of you is always helpful to your recommenders, who might only know the "professional you." Writing this information down will be helpful in preparing for your interviews, as your interviewer will often want to get to know "the person behind the resume."

Which schools?

In this section, you can provide detailed information on your target schools for the purpose of understanding how you will establish fit with each one. There are two types of information that you'll want to include for each target school:

1. Background information about the school, mainline statistics, and your strategy for getting in. The majority of the information can be taken directly from Chapter 5.
2. A discussion of why the school is a good fit for you, which will help you nail down your story for each school before you tackle your essays and interviews.

We've included Lauren's approach to the second component as an example.

The London Business School

LBS's international make-up is one of the main reasons why I'm applying to it. In college, I participated in a study abroad program at the London School of Economics and was the only American in my class. The experience, although brief, was truly life-changing. I learned as much from my team members—about the world and about myself—as I did from the class. I am certain that LBS would offer similar learning and growth experiences.

Another appealing feature is the school's (deliberately) small size, and thus, its sense of intimacy. Students give the school high marks for its culture and friendly atmosphere. According to one second-year MBA, LBS isn't "quite as competitive as some of the U.S. schools. You don't have to get a good grade at the expense of someone else." This is exactly the kind of environment that I am looking for!

Finally, because of its global focus, all LBS students must demonstrate competence in at least one language other than English by the time they graduate. While some students might view this requirement as something to "get over with," I look at it as a golden opportunity to make significant strides towards my goal of becoming fluent in French.

Kellogg School of Management (Northwestern University)

One of the largest b-schools among the Top 30, Kellogg enrolls some 600 students a year in its full-time program. Despite its size, however, Kellogg is able to create a unique, family-like culture through its team learning philosophy—one of the school's biggest draws and differentiators in my opinion. I have always enjoyed a collaborative approach and have never needed a great deal of competition to motivate myself. For these reasons, I believe Kellogg is a perfect fit for me culturally.

Kellogg has an extremely well-balanced program. Although Kellogg is best-known for its marketing program, it actually offers one of the strongest arrays of functional departments available anywhere. Most Kellogg MBAs major in two or three functional areas and can also opt to specialize in an interdisciplinary major. I would most likely major in strategy and finance and specialize in international business. I would also take advantage of the Global Initiatives in Management (GIM) program. Students in this program create specially-designed, two-quarter international independent study courses, and focus on a country of their choice. For each of the geographic areas, students work in groups to create a syllabus, book guest speakers, determine research topics, and identify key issues facing local industries. After coursework is completed during the winter quarter, students travel to the selected country over spring break for a two-week consulting project. Results are then presented to faculty and visiting executives in the spring. I would also take advantage of one of their exchange programs—most likely with HEC in France. Classes at HEC are conducted in both English and French, presenting an ideal opportunity for me to improve

my foreign language skills.

Stanford Graduate School of Business

Supporting an entrepreneurial spirit, Stanford's curriculum is very flexible and allows students to select from an array of electives while forming a strong general management foundation. MBA students are not required to major in specific academic disciplines.

Stanford offers a supportive, intimate culture. The business school does not publicly post grades or include overall class rank on academic transcripts. Rather, the collaborative culture frees students to take academic risks and broaden their management and leadership skills. These features are particularly appealing to me. My undergraduate engineering curriculum was extremely grade-focused and, in my opinion, the emphasis only detracted from the learning experience.

Another strength is the school's global management focus. International issues are integrated into the core courses and approximately 25 percent of Stanford electives focus on international topics. Stanford also provides career resources, speakers, student clubs, and conferences to help students connect with global companies.

Many of the global initiatives are provided through the Global Management Program (GMP). The GMP offers an academic certificate in global management for students (like me) who want to focus even more sharply on global issues. To earn the certificate, students complete at least five GSB electives with an international focus. I would definitely take advantage of this option. I would also pursue the Global Management Immersion Experience (GMIX). This program combines a core course in global management, a research project, and a summer internship for students to gain international work experience.

Students can earn up to 16 credits in courses offered outside of the business school. This feature would give me a chance to take advanced French language instruction—something that is nearly impossible to do when working on an out-of-town project.

The Wharton School (University of Pennsylvania)

Wharton is known as a leader and innovator in the b-school arena. It receives praise for its emphasis on international initiatives and creative approaches to teaching. Like Stanford, it has a nondisclosure grading policy which helps to foster a team environment and allows students to concentrate more on their areas of interest.

The first year of the program is divided into four six-week quarters. Students move through their classes as part of a 60 student cohort—a kind of class within a class. Each cluster shares the same team of core professors who work together to integrate the coursework and coordinate student workload. As a member of a cohort, I would be in an intimate environment, without giving up access to resources that larger schools have.

Wharton offers a number of optional programs for its students. One option for first year students that looks particularly appealing to me is the Global Immersion Program (GIP). This program involves six weeks of introductory lectures on a country or region critical to the world economy, with a four-week overseas experience following final exams in which students meet corporate and government officials, tour local businesses, and attend cultural events. Students also submit a written assignment in the Fall. Another enhancement program that fits well with my overall career goals is the Multinational Marketing and Management Program. This program partners Wharton with b-schools in Israel, Canada,

and other locations to form multi-school MBA teams that design marketing strategies for companies hoping to enter the North American market. Finally, students can opt to spend a full semester abroad in one of 14 exchange programs with non-U.S. business schools. I am strongly considering a semester at the HEC School of Management in France.

Summary

As you can see, the game plan is a powerful tool that allows you to record and refine your story prior to attacking the applications. This type of preparation will be of great benefit to you and your recommenders as the application process drags on. In fact, you should sit down with your recommenders and step through the plan and perhaps an essay or two that further describes your career goals. This will give them a broader understanding of the plan's purpose and ensure that they use it effectively.

Yes, assembling a game plan is time consuming, but an admittance letter is well worth the additional hours. It's important, therefore, that you not only assemble a dynamic game plan, but that you also execute it.

8 Truths of the Application Process

The one thing that every applicant comes away from the process with is stories. From the applicant whose computer crashed, wiping out all of his freshly written essays, to the applicant who was asked out by her interviewer, we all come away with something. While the unique experiences are probably more interesting, the common ones are probably more useful to you in your application preparation. With that in mind, here are eight experiences that will most probably find their way into your storybook.

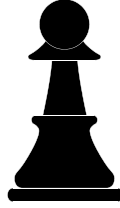
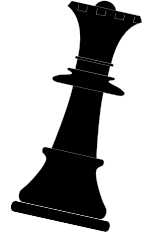
1. **Your first interview will be your worst.** Even Michael Jordan looked a little rusty when he first came out of retirement, so you shouldn't expect to be in top-notch condition after not interviewing for several years. This isn't to say that you'll "bomb" your first interview, but generally, applicants need to work through the first one before feeling entirely comfortable with the process again. If you follow the interview advice provided in Chapter 4, then you should be fine, but if possible, set your first interview up with your safety school.
2. **Your last application will be your best.** Many applicants start off working on the application to the school in which they are most interested. More often than not, this is a bad move. By the time you move on to your third or fourth application, you will be in prime application-writing mode. You will have a bunch of base essays from which to start and have already spent tremendous amounts of time revising them. This means that the last application will benefit from all of the knowledge you've gained by working through the first few. If time is not an issue, consider working on your highest priority application last.
3. **Visiting a school is always a good idea.** Would you buy a car that you couldn't see? Probably not, so you should also strongly consider visiting

your target schools. You will be surprised what you pick up, and doing so will help you score big points with the admissions committee.

4. **You will lose perspective and be tempted to make irrational decisions.** A friend of Scott's decided to try and save a couple bucks by sending in her recommendations via the regular mail only a few days before the deadline. As you might have guessed, her documents were lost in the mail and she was denied admittance. If you continue to view b-school as a long-term investment, saving a couple bucks while taking on significant risk becomes an obviously bad tradeoff.
5. **One of your recommenders will not meet the date with which you provide him.** We're busy people and so are our recommenders. Chances are, they'll accept our request to write a recommendation and then put it aside for awhile. It's up to you to ask them early, follow up often, and maybe even more importantly, set a due date that is far in advance of the application deadline.
6. **Your friends and family will get sick of hearing about the process.** Applying to business school can be a consuming process that takes over your life for a whole year. From taking the GMAT, to researching schools, to writing essays, to waiting for responses, the process will seem endless at times. And you will, of course, share your experiences with your friends and family. Unfortunately, they won't be able to understand the trials and tribulations associated with the process unless they've been through it themselves. So, be prepared for their glossy eyes and hollow "uh huh"s as the months drag on.
7. **You will spend more money on the process than you would ever have imagined.** GMAT study guides, exams, and classes; essay consultants; \$200 applications; visits to schools; book on application strategy—none of these come for free (although the book on application strategy provides a great ROI). As you get closer to receiving responses from your target schools, you'll notice the expenses piling up. Be prepared to make the necessary investment, because you won't want to go through it again.
8. **Receiving an admittance letter from your dream school will make it all worthwhile.** There are few more satisfying, fulfilling, and overall happy moments than receiving word that you've been admitted to your choice business school. Cartwheels, fist pumps, back flips—it'll all come out. Keep that in mind as your trudging through some of the more mundane aspects of the process.

7

GAME OVER



What Happens Once You Submit Your Application?

Like any good business manager, you should design your product (your application) with your customer (the admissions counselor) in mind. To that end, it helps for you to know what will happen to your application once the admissions committee receives it. No two schools are the exact same in how they process admissions applications, but what follows is a general example that will give you an idea of what a “typical” business school application goes through.

Once your application is received, it is usually held until all of your other materials are received (if sent separately), including recommendations or transcripts. Once all of these materials are received and the application is marked as ready for review, a reader will take it in a batch of applications, which can be as few as several applications and as many as dozens. At some schools, the first reader will be a current MBA student, while at other schools only admissions personnel review applications. The first reader will go through your entire application, including a transcript of your interview if you have already had one. The reader will look for evidence of the traits that the school seeks in every applicant (starting with the core dimensions that we outlined in Chapter 2), and will grade you on each of these traits. Based on how your application stacks up, it will receive a simple, high-level grade, such as Yes, Maybe, or No. These grades seem somewhat arbitrary, but for every application a reader fills out an extensive form to back up his decision, citing as many examples as possible or pointing out areas that call for further investigation.

Think about what this reader is faced with: A two-foot stack of applications that mostly look the same, a tight deadline, and the burden of having to decide whether an applicant should be admitted. You can help your cause by putting yourself in the reader’s shoes and thinking about how you can make his life easier:

- ❑ **Keep it short.** We cannot emphasize enough how important it is to stick to word limits in essays and data sheets. You are not the most important applicant, nor the one with the most interesting experiences. So make life easy by keeping things concise.
- ❑ **Make it interesting.** Don't use gimmicks, but do remember that your application will be one of dozens that your reader will see. An appropriately humorous paragraph or even whole essay will be appreciated, and will definitely be remembered.
- ❑ **Be organized.** If you don't follow instructions, don't expect a stressed application reader to contact you for missing information. Give yourself extra time to make sure that your application is totally complete.
- ❑ **Be clear about what you have to offer.** Present a focused message, one that your reader will easily understand. Stick only to examples and stories that highlight your core messages.

At most schools a second reader—who also may be a student but is often an admissions officer—will read your application and grade it based on the same exact criteria. The second reader almost never sees what decision the first reader has made on your application, so you can be sure that you will get a fair shake. The second reader will come to a decision and also back up her findings with an in-depth report.

Usually, a third decision-maker then comes into play, someone who is a little more senior in the process. It may be the admissions director, or it may be a somewhat senior admissions officer. If the first two readers agree that you are a Yes or a No, then your fate is quickly sealed, for better or for worse. If they disagree, then the third person will usually read the application herself and come to a final decision. There is sometimes spirited debate about a single application, but remember that everyone involved is trying to get through a huge stack of applications as efficiently as possible. If the third reader still can't decide, or the consensus seems to be "Maybe," then often that is when you will be placed on the waitlist.

Contrary to what it often seems, application readers and interviewers are not just looking for reasons to reject you. More than anything, they're looking to find out who you are and how well you embody each of the traits that they look for in an applicant. This sounds simple enough, but it can be especially challenging for a reader when faced with dozens of applications that all look the same. To this end, stay focused on your core messages of who you are and what you can offer to the program. This will make your application readers' jobs much easier, and will greatly improve your chances of admission.

The Five Response Types

Years ago, you could infer a business school's response to your application based on the size of the letter. The traditional belief held that if you received a thick letter in a manila folder then you were in and if you received a thin letter in a business envelope then you were out. Now, b-schools are much more responsive and generally contact applicants via phone, email, or secure Web page before the letter is even sent.

Although the communication vehicle has changed, what hasn't changed is the type of responses you can expect to receive.

There are five types of responses that you could receive:

- ☐ Direct admission.
- ☐ Admission with requirements.
- ☐ Admission with postponement.
- ☐ Waitlist.
- ☐ Denial.

Direct Admission

Hopefully, at least one of your target schools will fall into this category. If this is the case, then pat yourself on the back and celebrate, because you've accomplished what many applicants failed to do. But of course, no sooner than you receive your good news will you have to face a whole new crop of deadlines and decisions. We'll tackle some of the most common ones below.

Deciding Which School to Attend

This is one of the more pleasant decisions that you will ever have to make. Even though you may dread having to actually make the decision, don't forget that this is a dilemma that few others have the luxury of facing.

If you find yourself torn between two or more schools, take an inventory of what mattered most to you when you initially applied. How do you feel about these criteria now? Visit the schools (we highly recommend attending each school's on-campus events for admitted students) and get a feel for your potential future classmates. After all, these are the people with whom you may spend the next two years. Sit in on a class (even if you already did so months ago), and ask yourself if you could see yourself participating in the discussion. Yes, this sounds subjective, but your experience at business school will largely depend on how well you fit the culture, and vice versa.

Of course, there are more tangible attributes to consider as well, such as each school's reputation in your field of interest, its location, and how much money it offers you in scholarships or grants. First of all, don't become too obsessed with rankings. If two schools are close to one another in rank, then this is a moot question. Don't fool yourself into thinking that two or three notches in a magazine's rankings mean a thing in the real world. However, if you are deciding between a top-five school and a top-30 school, for example, we recommend that you place as little emphasis on scholarship dollars as possible. Even if the lower-ranked school offers you a "free ride," the money shouldn't be your main reason for enrolling there. Yes, mountains of debt can be scary, but you really need to think long-term, and ask yourself which school will help you the most down the road. Greater career opportunities in the future are surely worth more than a few thousand dollars today. The same goes for other factors, such as geography. Remember that business school is just two years, but the benefits that you take away will be with you for the rest of your life. So, don't sell yourself short.

That's not to say that you should always enroll in the higher-ranked school over the lower-ranked one. Far too many applicants make their decision solely on the basis of rankings, and they really aren't being true to themselves. There may very well be a legitimate reason why the top-30 school appeals to you more than the top-five school does, including strength in certain academic fields or unique career opportunities. If that's the case, don't let anyone lead you to believe that you're making the wrong choice. Go where your heart tells you to go. We simply urge that you make your decision for rational reasons, not for the short-term convenience of having less debt or living in a sunnier climate for two years.

Remember, you won't ruin your life by making the "wrong" decision! The b-school you attend won't determine your lot in life. The fact that you were able to gain admission to more than one of these schools is a good indicator that you'll be successful. Where you are 20 years from now will depend much more on your ambition and skills than on whether you choose to attend the number seven- or 10-ranked business school right now. Go where you think you will get the most out of the MBA experience, and the rest will take care of itself.

The deferment question

All schools discourage admitted students from deferring their enrollment, and many explicitly state in their application materials that they don't allow deferment *for any reason*. Still, even those b-schools who purport that they don't allow deferment will generally consider it under certain circumstances. And there are some reasons why you may want to delay the start of your business school experience. The most common reasons for an applicant wanting to defer for a year usually have to do with a professional opportunity or a change in personal circumstances.

If your company offers you a big promotion or a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to take on a new project, then you may want to think about pushing off b-school for a year. The biggest question to consider is whether it's an opportunity that will come along again anytime in the near future. If you believe that your new role would allow you to gain rare new skills and experiences that will help you down the road, then seriously consider it. If, however, your company is just trying to keep you around for another year by offering you more money or a better title, don't be so quick to defer your enrollment. Yes, the money can look good, but maintain a perspective that extends 20 years into the future. Earning those extra bucks today pales in comparison to the opportunity cost of waiting another year to accelerate your career.

Some people face personal reasons for wanting to defer their enrollment, such as the birth of a child or an illness in the family. If you are faced with a situation that you believe will make it hard to devote 100 percent of your energy to your MBA, then consider deferring. Remember, though, that it's easy to think of *any* time as a bad time to start business school (something always seems to come up). So, only defer if you are sure that your personal circumstances will look significantly different in a year.

If you have decided that you want to defer, and your school will consider letting you do so, then you will have to build a strong case for why it makes sense to wait a year. When it comes to professional reasons, an admissions committee will ask questions

along the lines of what we raised previously: What is it about this new opportunity that will make you that much better able to contribute to your class a year from now? Be prepared to argue your case using a framework similar to what you employed in your original application. If you can craft a convincing story that is consistent with your overall application theme, you will stand a chance of gaining a deferment. Remember, though, that a deferment is never guaranteed.

Schools tend to be a little more willing to listen to personal reasons for deferment because they know that business school will consume your life once you arrive. Honestly let the school know your situation and explain why you are afraid that it may interfere with your business school experience. Schools will usually be very understanding, and will work with you to find a solution. They may not offer you a deferment, but they may at least be able to offer you other options, such as the chance to start during the school's January term.

In any case, be prepared to do some convincing, both via letter and over the phone. Even though many schools tend to be a little more lenient than they let on, many applicants who ask for deferments are not granted them. Also, you will definitely be expected to submit your initial tuition deposit (usually on the order of \$1,000 to \$2,500) now in order to hold your spot in next year's class. This deposit is non-refundable, so be prepared to kiss it goodbye if you decide next year that business school isn't in your plans after all.

Financial Aid

Once you're admitted and you know which school you will be attending, then you need to worry about how you're going to pay for the whole affair. Most schools will send financial aid information along with your admittance letter, or will send it shortly after admitting you. You will need to submit information about your financial status, both to the school and to the federal government. The latter will receive the information that you enter into your Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA (accessible online at www.fafsa.ed.gov). Get familiar with these forms as quickly as possible, especially because some schools call for your old tax returns dating back as many as three years. If your jaw just hit the floor when you read that last sentence, don't worry. You can contact the IRS to get these copies (look for IRS Form 4506).

You should submit your financial aid application as early as possible since most schools are doling out a fixed amount of money. Just as applying earlier in the admissions process makes things easier because there are more seats to be had in the class, applying earlier for financial aid gives you a better chance of getting more aid. While being the first one to apply won't necessarily get you a significant amount more, you definitely don't want to be among the last to apply, because the money may already be spoken for by then. In fact, if you're reasonably confident that you will receive admission to at least one of your target schools, then you should consider actually filling out your FAFSA forms even before you get your responses. Also, you should still apply if you feel like your situation will make you ineligible for grants given by your business school. Many applicants across all types of situations get a small amount of aid. You'd be crazy to not at least try for this free money, even if the odds seem to be against you.

After you have filled out the requisite forms, your school will get back to you quickly enough to ensure that you have enough time to arrange for other sources of aid, if needed. Some schools offer merit-based aid, some offer need-based aid, and some offer both. Most of this aid will be in the form of grants (money that you don't have to pay back). Whatever the case is for your school, the amount that the school offers is rarely negotiable. Some students have had success negotiating what aid they get, but need-based aid is hard to negotiate (because it tends to go by a formula that takes your assets into consideration), and a majority of merit-based aid decisions will likely have already been made by the time you contact the school. It's worth a shot, but don't expect to get very far in negotiating with the financial aid office.

Assuming that you will need an external source of loans (most students do), there are a few programs in place that make it relatively easy to get money for your education. While your financial situation may not qualify you for grants from the school, you may be eligible for Stafford loans from the federal government. These come in two types: subsidized and unsubsidized. Although you won't have to start paying off either type of Stafford loan while you're in school, subsidized loans are preferable, because interest doesn't accrue until you graduate. Naturally, subsidized loans are harder to qualify for. How much you're eligible to receive and the type of Stafford loan you can get depends on your financial situation (as dictated by your FAFSA results). Who actually services your Stafford loan (who cuts the check) can be anyone from your school to a third party bank such as Sallie Mae. Shopping around can help you save on fees and interest rates.

You'll also have private loan options. Many schools partner with a major bank like Citigroup to offer "preferred" student rates on loans. They are usually fairly competitive, although with some shopping around you can often find a better deal on your own. These loans are usually structured so that you don't start paying them back until you graduate. For American students, these loans tend to be very easy to qualify for, but international students generally have to provide detailed, verifiable proof of assets in order to qualify.

The bottom line is that business school is expensive, but practically no one has to turn down the chance to attend because the costs are too great. Be prepared to fill out lots of forms, patiently research loan options, and take on debt. Just remember: This is a long-term investment!

Scholarships, fellowships, and teaching assistantships

Outside of taking on loans and receiving a b-school grant, graduate business students have it pretty tough in terms of finding sources of income for tuition purposes. The prevailing belief is that we're all going to be rich someday, and therefore aren't in dire need of financial assistance. Although scholarships aren't plentiful for aspiring MBAs, there are definitely some opportunities that exist. Rather than searching for one-off scholarships, check out www.fastweb.com. The FastWeb Website will ask you a number of questions in regard to your general background, demographics, and area of study. After completing the detailed questions, you will receive a report that cites the scholarships for which you can apply. Each scholarship has different application

requirements and timelines, so you can select those scholarships that suit you best. FastWeb will also continuously send you updates as the year progresses and new scholarships become available.

In addition to these “external” scholarships, there sometimes are additional funding opportunities internal to b-schools to which you may not have access until you actually attend a school. Many b-schools will offer their students the opportunity to apply for additional scholarships, fellowships, or teaching assistantships after they start classes. Keep these additional sources in mind and make sure to ask your b-school about them, so that you can take advantage later down the line.

Admission With Requirements

You may find that you’re offered a conditional admission to your target school. Don’t worry, this is not an insult. In fact, it speaks pretty favorably of you if the school was willing to admit you despite an obvious weakness. Look at it as an opportunity to get a head start on your MBA experience, or at least to brush up on your weaker subjects.

Most frequently, a school will require you to successfully complete a pre-MBA course in a quantitative subject such as statistics or a business-related course such as accounting. Some schools offer these programs before your first semester begins, but most will ask that you complete this coursework at a local accredited college. Your business school will usually be very willing to work with you to help make this happen.

There are two things to be aware of, though. First, because you don’t know what schedule your local college operates on, start researching your options as soon as possible to avoid missing an enrollment deadline. The sooner you can take a class to pass your requirement, the better. Second, you should know that you will have to take these courses on your own dime. So, add these costs into your budget as you plan for business school.

Admission With Postponement

This is a rare decision to receive, and it usually applies to undergraduates and those who have very little business experience. Your school may tell you that it likes what it sees in your application, but that it wants you to work for a year or two more before you enroll. Even though this may be frustrating, it’s still much better than a rejection, so take heart. Also know that if the school feels strongly enough about your application to offer you this rare opportunity, then they probably have a point. In the cases with which we’re familiar, the applicants have said that the extra work experience helped them get more out of their b-school experience.

Waitlist

Finding out that you’ve been placed on the waitlist is a melancholy moment. After all of your efforts and patience, you’ve essentially been asked to wait some more. The immediate question that comes to an applicant’s mind at this point is, “What are my chances of getting off the waitlist and into the school?” Generally, your chances of

getting off a b-school's waitlist are directly related to that b-school's yield percentage. If, for example, a school has a 90 percent yield, your chances of getting off the waitlist are probably pretty slim. Other factors that will play a role in determining your chances of winning a spot include the total number of applicants accepted, the size of the b-school class, as well as the number of applicants who were placed on the waitlist. While it's nice to know the initial factors that will determine your chances, these numbers differ greatly from school to school and year to year. Regardless of what the chances are, there are a number of steps you can take to greatly increase your chances of turning a waitlist into an admission.

The first step you should take is to understand your target school's policy on the waitlist. Most schools will provide you with a contact within the admissions office who will hopefully be your main advocate in helping you gain admissions. If you haven't already guessed, it's important to get this person to like you, so use tact in your communications. The second step you should take is to review all of your application materials in order to evaluate *why* you weren't directly admitted. The fact that you've been placed on the waitlist means that you're a solid applicant, but there must be at least one aspect of your story that came across as a little weak.

Run down this list of questions when evaluating what your weaknesses might be.

- ☐ Are my career goals defined effectively?
- ☐ What problems will I solve through achieving my career goals?
- ☐ Who will I affect through achieving my career goals?
- ☐ Is it clear how attending b-school will help me achieve my career goals?
- ☐ In what ways do I emphasize fit with the b-school in my application?
- ☐ How do I demonstrate leadership, innovation, maturity, and teamwork abilities?
- ☐ Did I effectively demonstrate my ability to perform well academically at b-school through my GMAT, GPA, transcript, and professional experience?
- ☐ How does my application differentiate me from others with a similar profile?
- ☐ Did I communicate passion for the b-school's mission?
- ☐ Did I do enough in terms of visiting the school, and speaking with current students and alumni?

After running through the list, if you're still not sure what your weakness is, consider having a friend, student, or alum read through your application, asking the same questions. Sometimes having an outside perspective can help you recognize weaknesses of which you were previously unaware. For example, you might think your career goals are crystal clear, while others who read your application are confused about what you're trying to communicate. Naturally, this sort of analysis should be done even before you submit your application, but it can be extremely helpful in crafting your messages when trying to get off the waitlist.

Once you've identified the areas that you would like to strengthen in the eyes of the of the admissions committee, you should select the methods you would like to utilize in your approach. Some of the methods that successful applicants have utilized

include:

- ❑ **Follow-up calls to an admissions officer:** Having semi-frequent conversations with your contact in the admissions committee is a great way to keep your name at the top of his mind. By following up and asking if there are any further developments, you will be able convey your strong interest in gaining admittance. Admissions officers want to make sure that anyone who is admitted from the waitlist will accept, so in these conversations, you can underscore the fact that officer's school is your top choice. Of course, there is a fine line here between sounding interested and becoming annoying. Daily calls or badgering the admissions officer is great way to ensure that you never get off the waitlist. Sometimes the officer will give you guidance in terms of when you should check back in, but in lieu of that guidance we suggest a call every three weeks.
- ❑ **An additional recommendation:** Sending an additional recommendation can be a great way to emphasize character strengths that the target school values. Coming from a third party, it contains all of the benefits that your initial recommendations contained. Having reviewed your application for potential weaknesses, you can work with the additional recommender in focusing on those perceived weak areas. If, for example, you think that the admissions committee might question your quantitative abilities, your recommender could discuss a rigorous analytical analysis that you recently completed. Ideally, this recommender is an alum of the b-school. Because it's a more targeted recommendation than the originals, it is not a necessity that the recommender know you as well. What you're shooting for is a recommendation that persuades the admissions committee that you have the requisite abilities and that you would be a great addition to the culture. Certainly an alum can speak most effectively to the second objective. Of course, if you don't have access to an alum, a targeted recommendation from someone who can write convincingly about your qualifications is adequate.
- ❑ **A business course or an improved GMAT score:** Depending on when you hear back from your target school, this method may or may not be option. Given time, however, you might want to consider taking a business course or retaking the GMAT if you get the sense that the school has some reservations about your academic ability. In some cases, a school will actually allude to the fact that you will need to display more academic prowess in order to get off the waitlist. If you go down either or both paths and perform well, this is a great way to push yourself over the top.
- ❑ **Dialogue with a faculty member:** This method has the least predictable results and therefore is somewhat risky. The goal is to find a faculty member with whom you have similar interests and engage her in regard to those interests. Faculty members tend to like to discuss the topics that they've dedicated their lives to, so they are often open to discussing them. Your hope is that as a result of these brief conversations, the faculty mem-

ber will enjoy the dialogue enough to approach the admission committee and request that you be admitted. Of course, admissions committees take faculty input very seriously, so if you get that far, a positive result is more likely than not. The trick is getting that far. Just like contacting the admissions committee, contacting a faculty member holds the possibility that you will annoy her. In fact there is a greater possibility of this result, because the faculty member isn't expecting you to contact her. As such, you should proceed cautiously when selecting this method. For one thing, don't go after the world-renowned faculty member. Chances are that Michael Porter isn't going to freely swap e-mails with you. Rather, go after a young faculty member who appears open to being engaged in such a manner. Students can help point you to the professors who fall into that category. Also, make sure you know what you're talking about. The point is to find someone with whom you truly share interests, so it's important that you can speak intelligently about those common interests. Indiscriminately contacting faculty members and blabbering about how you need to get off the waitlist is a great way to get off that list...and on to the rejection list.

- ❑ **A follow-up letter:** The follow-up letter is a great method to use in that it is the least risky and the method over which you have the most control. As a result, a well-written letter can be one of the most effective methods to utilize in getting off the waitlist. Follow-up letters generally provide the admissions committee with information about your activities since you've applied. In some cases, you might not find out that you've been placed on the waitlist until five months after you sent in your application. That means there are plenty of new experiences to discuss that would improve your candidacy in the eyes of the admissions committee. Additionally, the follow-up letter is a great method to use to pin-point the weaknesses that you uncovered in your application evaluation. Finally, the follow-up letter can highlight your fit with the b-school's culture and your passion for the b-school's mission.

What follows is an example of a follow-up letter written by a successful applicant who, after evaluating his application, decided to communicate several messages that he felt would resonate positively with admissions. The letter is written to the applicant's contact in the admissions committee. Although the applicant is very strong in terms of credentials, he failed to adequately represent himself in his application. In this follow-up letter, he focuses on demonstrating his abilities, discussing his career goals, and establishing fit with the target school. This was a very effective combination and won the applicant a spot in the incoming class.

Sean's follow-up letter

The purpose of this letter is to further support my candidacy for admission to Top Business School (TBS). In short, attending TBS would be the perfect "next step" as I progress toward

my long-term goals. Because fit with any institution is a two-way street, I will focus my comments on my professional progress, business model development, global perspective, community service involvement, and natural affinity with the TBS curriculum. These are all activities and attributes that would allow me to become a dynamic member of the TBS student community and eventually a leading member of the TBS alumni community. — — —

Nice introduction that lets the admissions officer know exactly what to expect from this communication.

Professional progress

Since submitting my application to TBS, I have played key roles on two additional assignments that have strengthened my professional background. These roles have also provided me with additional experiences that I would bring into the TBS classroom.

As highlighted in my application, I am interested in increasing my knowledge of finance and marketing so that I can develop business cases for technological innovations. The roles that I've played on these assignments have helped start me in that direction. — — — — —

Sean does a nice job of putting his additional professional experiences into perspective in terms of his career goals rather than simply listing what he's done since submitting his application.

I recently completed a project involving an IT value assessment of a large pharmaceutical company. I played an integral part in determining the economic value added (EVA) of the corporation's IT expenditures. In order to determine how to better manage IT costs and enhance value to end-customers, I instituted a process that allowed the team to analyze IT cost drivers and distinguish between non-core and core IT functions. After careful review of the client's current technical solution evaluation processes, I developed a standard technical solution implementation methodology tailored to the demands and requirements of the company. To further enable the client to effectively manage IT expenses while maintaining market share, I created an IT competitive positioning strategy.

Currently, I am working with a core team of employees who recently formed SimTech's pharmaceutical group. In the last few months, my group has released Pharmtek. Pharmtek is a pharmaceutical industry-specific information technology solution package that is expected to experience rapid market growth over the next five years. To maximize our relationships with potential customers who might be interested in the Pharmtek solution, my team is focused on generating sales, recruiting and training skilled resources, developing external marketing campaigns, and generating support materials for sales teams. One of my primary tasks on this project has been to conduct research on major pharmaceutical industry trends. My research has focused on Customer Relationship Management (CRM), supply

chain management, and the financing of research and development. Gaining a deeper knowledge of the activities of each functional area has given me a better understanding of our customers' strategic directions and the way in which technology can enable those directions. An added benefit, from a long-term perspective, has been that I have gained further insight into how I can activate a business model in the pharmaceutical industry.

Business model development

In my application to TBS, I stated my long-term ambition is to develop a global electronic exchange through which a select group of pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies can dynamically exchange research techniques and knowledge of various compounds. Through extensive research and a better understanding of the pharmaceutical industry, I have altered my concept to focus on purchasing trends of hospitals. My objective is to create a national exchange that allows hospitals to consolidate their purchasing power, reducing healthcare costs for hospitals and for patients.

Over the past six months, I have spent numerous hours developing a business plan that details the intricacies of my target market, business operations, and financials. The plan's pro forma financial statements indicate that there is a significant opportunity for such offerings both in the United States and in Europe. In the near term, I would like to improve my understanding of finance and marketing, while refining my business model. I also intend to submit my plan to a variety of local investment capital programs, such as the TBS Venture Fund and other lending institutions for financing. — — — — —

Sean mentioned that he felt one of the weaknesses of his application was confusion around his career goals. Certainly this section helps the admissions officer understand the direction in which he's going. Sean actually followed up this letter by submitting an initial draft of his business plan to TBS.

Global perspective

The globalization trend continues to integrate information flow across nations. Having an understanding of globalization is therefore vital to the success of business leaders. A strong global perspective is an attribute that I have been able to impart in both my professional and personal endeavors. On a professional level, a global perspective has allowed me to provide insight in SimTech's analyses of clients who have outsourced operations to East Asian nations. Additionally, being bilingual and maintaining a strong network in Taiwan has been essential to my interactions with our global customers.

Community service involvement

One important component of my personal interests that I was not able to fully convey in my application is my involvement

in community service activities. Upon graduating from Adams University, I decided to participate in the Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) program, which pairs adults with at-risk children from single-parent households. In January of 2000, I was matched with twins. As a Big Brother, it is impossible to count the number of ways that I had an impact on my Littles' lives. Over the course of our relationship, I have tried to instill the value of education and the desire to achieve a college degree. In addition to the impact that I have had on the boys, they have taught me not to always take myself so seriously. I would say that it has been a mutually beneficial relationship.

The desire to create opportunities for others led me to establish a scholarship program in February 2000 at my alma mater. The scholarship is awarded each year to two entering freshmen who graduate from an inner city high school. The scholarship is given based on academic performance, community involvement, and an essay.

Most recently, I participated in School to Work Day, an annual SimTech team event in which we host local high school students. The day focused on connecting the academic world with the business world. Students were exposed to three different modules: resume building, public speaking, and a business case. As the lead for the public speaking module, I organized the material to be presented and coordinated the session. Each student had the opportunity to practice his or her public speaking skills and learn useful speaking tips that would be useful during presentations under myriad conditions.

Involvement with community outreach will continue to play a large role in my activities. I intend to establish foundations in both the United States and Taiwan that will assist underprivileged children in gaining access to educational opportunities that would otherwise be out of reach. — — — — —

Sean made a big mistake in his application by not referencing any of his community service activities even though he's quite active. Certainly this section demonstrates to the admissions committee that he's involved with the community.

Natural affinity with TBS

As stated in my application, I believe that I would learn a great deal from TBS's cross-functional approach and "hands-on" style of teaching. The curriculum is very strong in the areas of finance, marketing, and international business. I have only become more convinced that TBS is the best place for me to pursue an MBA through discussions with current students and alumni, additional visits to campus, and further research on the curriculum and faculty. Moreover, my academic focus in computer science, combined with my professional experiences in high tech have given me a solid background from which my

TBS classmates would benefit and on which I would continue to build. Finally, the team atmosphere that TBS cultivates is inviting, as it reflects the emphasis on teamwork that is inherent within SimTech. — — — — —

Sean is tactful in the way that he implicitly says that he'd accept an offer from TBS if it was given.

Upon graduating from TBS, I would like to spend a few years further honing my finance and marketing skills by getting on the front lines pitching the added value of technological innovation, all while continuing the development and refinement of my business plan. I am certain that TBS is the best institution for me in terms of preparation for such roles.

Below I have listed additional specific TBS resources from which I could benefit.

Faculty with similar professional interests:

- ☐ *Professor Ivy E. Lester—Professor of Finance.*
- ☐ *Professor David Aguliar—Professor of Technological Innovation and Entrepreneurship.*
- ☐ *Professor Anupam Kumar—Professor of High Technology Marketing.*

Classes of interest:

- ☐ *Marketing Management.*
- ☐ *Marketing Technology.*
- ☐ *Financing Your Start-up.*
- ☐ *Selling Technical Innovation.*
- ☐ *Strategic Marketing Planning.*
- ☐ *Preparing Your Business Plan.*
- ☐ *Entrepreneurial Management.*
- ☐ *International Marketing Management.*
- ☐ *Sources of Venture Capital and Private Equity.*
- ☐ *Principles of Corporate Finance.*

Activities of interest:

- ☐ *Asia Business Conference.*
- ☐ *Global Projects Club.*
- ☐ *Entrepreneurship Club.*
- ☐ *Entrepreneurship and Venture Capital Club.* — — — — —

Simply listing a b-school's resources isn't all that impressive, but after gaining an understanding of Sean's background and goals, having these lists helps show how TBS will help Sean achieve his career goals.

I am pleased to have been admitted to the waitlist and can assure you that if I am admitted to TBS, my unique background and strong spirit in the areas of culture, professional knowledge, academics and community involvement will supplement the TBS environment and experience. I look forward to joining you in August.

Sincerely,

Sean

The secret to coming up with a successful strategy for getting off the waitlist is to put together some combination of the five methods that addresses the weaknesses of your application. In Sean's case he contacted the admissions committee from time to time, submitted an additional recommendation from an alum, and of course, sent the follow-up letter that you just read. Clearly, getting off the waitlist is no easy task, but for those who are committed to the process and are willing to put together a targeted strategy, they will be able to greatly increase their chances, just as in the initial application process.

Denial

It feels just like a punch in the stomach. "The Admissions Committee has thoroughly evaluated your application and regretfully cannot offer you a spot in the incoming class." Suddenly you don't want to face any of your friends, family members, or peers at work. While getting denied by one or more of your target schools can certainly be a humbling experience, there is a lot to be learned from it.

First, it's important to realize that the world isn't going to come to an end. Applying to top business schools is inherently a competitive process and odds are that you will receive at least one denial. Second, you should take some time to evaluate your application using the questions in the section on the waitlist. It's important that you identify how you went astray in case you decide to reapply. Along those lines, a large number of schools offer personalized feedback to applicants who are not granted admission. Take advantage of that even you'd prefer never to hear the b-school's name again. Applicants generally find these feedback sessions to be useful and those that incorporate the feedback into the following year's application often achieve admittance. In general, rates of admission for reapplicants are higher, but usually not by more than a few percentage points.

With respect to reapplying, you may face a situation in which you are admitted to one of your target schools but are still considering reapplying to a school that was higher on the list. If you are confronted with this situation, then you should ask yourself whether the b-school to which you've been admitted will provide you with an opportunity to achieve your career goals. If the answer is no, then you shouldn't have applied to the school in the first place. Just make sure that you don't pass on an option that would allow you to achieve your goals so that you can potentially attend a "more prestigious" business school in the future.

If you do decide to reapply, make sure that you fully understand the weaknesses of your initial applications and that you attack them tirelessly using the techniques we've outlined in previous chapters. With another year to prepare yourself, your application should shine with polish.

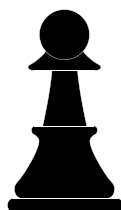
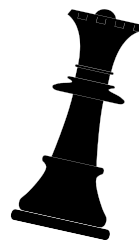
Certainly the goal of this book is to help you avoid facing the prospect of receiving denials. We feel strongly that if you closely follow the prescriptions we've outlined, you will be in a much better position to receive a thick letter once decision day comes. All the best!

Closing Thoughts

The one person who controls your application's fate more than anyone is you. Sure, it's difficult sending your application into the abyss not knowing the final outcome, but by the time of submission you'll have spent months maximizing your chances for success. Fit with your target school will be obvious. Your uniqueness will be clear. And your thick letter will be forthcoming. Let us know when you succeed. All the best!



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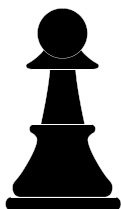
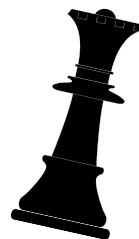
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